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DOWN THE DEER PATH: REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF HUNTING IN
AMERICA

By

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Thesis

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Down the Deer Path: Reflections on the Future of Hunting in America

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This collection of chapters delves into the dramatically shifting landscape of hunting sports from a personal perspective of a young hunter. As older hunters age out of the sport, hunter-funded conservation initiatives are in danger of losing support. This work examines the nature of relationships between hunters, their prey, and their worldview, as well as the elements of hunting that appeal to new hunters, and the challenges they may face as they become the hunters of the future.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: A Gendered History of Hunting	19
Chapter 2: The Literary Hunter	42
Chapter 3: Hunting, Race, and Culture	64
Chapter 4: Hunting, Kinship, Community, and Spirituality	87
Chapter 5: Ethics and Sustainability	108
Chapter 6: Hunting and the Education of the Next Generation	131
References	151

Acknowledgements

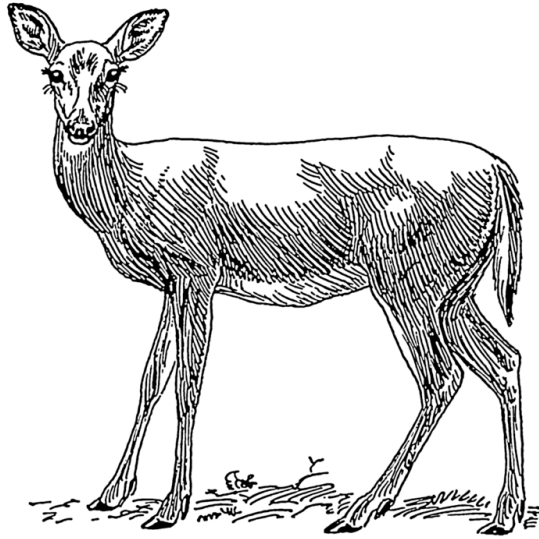
The completion of the project would have been impossible without help from numerous people. My instructors at the University of Montana and the members of my graduate committee have been some of the most insightful and constructive teachers I have ever known.

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Many thanks are owed to my mom, Rose Bussjaeger, who encouraged an early love of books and the outdoors through book fairs and family camping trips, and to my dad, Steve Bussjaeger, the first hunter I ever knew.

Introduction: Down the Deer Path



The beginning is difficult to pinpoint, but I remember my boots sunken into a deep, crusted November snow in northern Minnesota, staring down at the gray pawprint of a wolf. At 11 years old, my hands, snuggled deep in puffy mittens, would have been dwarfed by the wide spread of the four toes, splayed like snowshoes for easy travel.

This is how the wild wolf walks.

That time was one of many reminders that we walk in the world of wild animals. Unlike the world of the zoo, there was nothing between me and this wolf. It might be out there still, a little ways ahead, watching from the shadow of the pines. I looked around, as if I might somehow spy it.

The wolf pawprint was embedded in a plowed part of the driveway at Deep Portage Conservation Reserve, pointed out to my classmates and me by one of the outdoor educators leading our activities this weekend. It was a rite of passage for the

entire fifth grade class at Lincoln Elementary to spend a weekend of fun and learning about the great outdoors here before our education took us on and up in the world. I'd spent long hours in the Minnesota woods before, playing at wildness, but here, for the first time, it was real. The wild world was only as hidden as your eyes failed to see.

My father taught me how to see deer trails. I followed behind him in the woods and he showed me where they made their beds—flat depressions in thickets of tall grasses. They looked like the kind of bed I might like for myself if I were cast off to live in the wilderness: springy with soft grasses and protected from the wind and the eyes of predators by the standing stalks.

Even today, every so often, while following the flat, leisurely, human-made trails through the woods, I cleave off to follow the narrow, rutted furrow of a deer trail as it leads away into the woods. As I duck under low branches, and dodge wellings of mud, I can feel what it is to occupy the deer world, to be a little shorter than I stand now, to lift four feet and set them down so sure and cautious. To walk in the footsteps of a deer is to think like a deer.

To walk in the footsteps of deer is also to think like a predator. To observe the signs, interpret the marks, and determine where your prey has gone, what it will do next, is the intelligence of the hunter. I never pictured humans as hunters the same way that wolves are hunters: though our hunting excels in method and rate of success, it also seems something like an imitation of hunting, an adaptation, a revision.

But it isn't fair to pit the hominid against the wolf—we are both hunters in our own ways. To follow the steps of the human hunter is to think like the human hunter. In

my life I have seen only the one wolf pawprint, and I have not yet followed it far enough to learn how the wolf thinks.

I am not who people usually picture when they imagine a hunter. As compared to the average hunter, I'm probably a head shorter, 20-40 years younger, and a whole lot more female.

According to the 2016 Hunting & Fishing report from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 90 percent of hunters in the U.S. are men, and 60 percent of them are over the age of 45. Only 12 percent of hunters had more than 5 years of college education. Among hunting parties, I have gotten used to being the youngest, the most educated, and often, the most conspicuously female.

No, I don't look like the average hunter. And it's not exactly the first thing that comes up in conversation among my work and peer groups. I remember taking particular delight in the contrast while playing an icebreaker game on the first day of rehearsal with my college a cappella choir. "Two Truths and a Lie" is a game that hinges on first impressions. In order to win, you have to pick truths about yourself that are surprising, and lies that seem likely.

So my lie, then, was something like "I have read all of the *Lord of the Rings* books," because with my glasses and gawky build, I knew I looked like the kind of person who has read the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

For the first truth: maybe something like "I've had two broken bones in my life," which sounds just ambiguous enough to be fabricated.

And the last truth, my secret weapon: "I am legally firearm certified."

The complete surprise in my classmates' faces as they sorted out the truths never failed to satisfy. I bristled at first-glance assumptions, and delighted in overturning them.

However, like a tom turkey flaring up its impressive tail, my pride at the time was mostly show. At the time, I'd never killed an animal, I hadn't hunted in five years, and I wasn't sure I ever would again.

Like many hunters, my introduction to outdoor sports came first through fishing. On visits to my grandma's house out in rural Withrow Township, I preferred to toddle behind my dad to the fishing dock rather than stay inside and visit. We'd spend evenings on the city pier in my hometown, reeling in tiny perch that glowed neon under the magnified magic of clear waves and sunbeams. The passion for fishing was never my own; it was simply a time to spend outdoors with my dad, splashing in the water, digging out earthworms from the Styrofoam bait container, tossing stale bread to gulls overhead, who could sometimes catch crumbs right out of the air.

My dad has been a hunter for as long as I can remember. I rarely ever tasted beef, since our freezer was filled with venison every winter.

It was a part of his life that I rarely saw, but that he talked about frequently. I knew his favorite animal was a whitetail deer and his favorite fish was a walleye. Hunting was more or less out of sight, out of mind.

There's an inherent tension when you grow up in a suburb like White Bear Lake. You're pulled uncontrollably into the powerful gyre of the Twin Cities, where all the important things seem to happen, but floating at the rim of wide, rural counties to the north. Unlike the experience of the great outdoor writers I've admired, children in the suburbs are not given a .22 and free range of some expansive forested acreage. There is no acreage. There's a chain link fence to keep in a dog, a black walnut tree, and an unobstructed view of the neighbors' hideous blow-up pool in the next yard.

But fervor for outdoor sports was evident in nearly every driveway: the fishing boat, the RV the size of a tank. People in my neighborhood worked in the cities and suburbs so they could spend their free time on the hills and lakes. We went camping at state parks some weekends in the summer, instilling in me a deep affection for the novelties of the natural world. Wild animals absolutely captivated my imagination. I knew my dad killed them for sport, but I was able to maintain a sort of cognitive disconnect—that was fine for him, but I didn't think I could ever harm a creature as graceful and unknowable as the wild deer.

Many U.S. citizens today feel exactly the same way. Although public approval of hunting reached a high of 80 percent in 2019, the most recent numbers from the USFWS 2016 report showed that only 4 percent of Americans actually hunted that year. I've talked with people who are okay with the idea of other people hunting, but have made the choice not to hunt themselves. Many of them have said that it's the personal, ultimate act

of actively killing an animal that discourages them from participating. Others object outright, arguing for animal rights and the complete removal of animal-based foods from the human diet.

Regardless of how people feel about hunting, there are fewer and fewer people on the ground participating.

In his book *Meat Eater*, hunter and outdoor writer Steven Rinella called our modern moment "the autumn of hunting." Compared to the better part of human history, from our hunter-gatherer past and through the rise of agriculture, a smaller percentage of the population are hunters today than ever before. A number of factors are at play, including urbanization, access to wild lands, aging hunters, and shifting attitudes toward wildlife.

Participation in hunting peaked in 1982, according to *Outdoor Life*. About a third of all hunters in the nation are part of the Baby Boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964. My dad is one of them.

Hunting is a physically demanding sport. As this group of hunters hits their late sixties and early seventies, they will begin to age out of the hunting population, causing an even sharper decline.

The retention and recruitment of hunters is critical to the North American model of conservation that has governed the way we manage wildlife for more than a century. Yearly hunting licenses, along with taxes on guns, ammunition, and fishing equipment, provide about 60 percent of the funding for state wildlife agencies, according to a 2018 article from NPR. The financial support from sportsmen-and-women has contributed to immensely successful efforts to restore habitat and wild game populations across the

nation. The falling numbers of hunters means smaller budgets and unfortunate repercussions for wildlife management agencies, and by extension, wildlife. State management agencies are cutting back on staff and expenditures. Reduced funding for habitat protection and improvement may result in more species threatened by extinction. Hunters and non-hunters alike care deeply about wildlife and the habitat that supports them, but the hunter-provided dollars will no longer be available at nearly the same scale. Some states have implemented extra sales taxes; others have begun offering special lottery tickets or license plates to help make up the difference. The idea of taxes on other sporting goods, such as tents and sleeping bags, has been on the table for a while as well. Congress has considered tapping funds from mineral and energy development on state lands.

One of the simplest solutions, however, is simply to recruit as many new hunters as possible. As with so many troublesome problems of the modern world, the best hope lies with the next generation.

Once we were old enough to keep out of trouble, my dad started letting my younger brother and me tag along on family pheasant hunts. I adored time spent in the woods and fields, the same way I was enchanted by family camping trips. My dad enrolled me in the formal firearm safety program when I was 14, and did the same for my brother a few years later. By autumn of 2009, I was ready to join him in the woods for the

first time on a white-tailed deer hunt. But I still wasn't certain of my own ability to actually level my sights on a living creature and pull the trigger.

I tried to balk by inventing small inconveniences. I didn't want to climb into a tree stand—Dad bought me a ground blind. I didn't want to sit in the cold—Dad got me handwarmers and a Mr. Heater Buddy. He accommodated every capricious demand, so I sat in my ground blind with a rifle pressing cold across my knees, hoping that no deer would cross my path so I wouldn't have to make the choice.

To my relief, I saw no deer that year, nor the year after. Deer hunting faded into the background, and I all too willingly let my academic pursuits take center stage. With my artistic aptitude, I received writing and music scholarships to attend one of the most liberal and artsy of the liberal arts schools the Twin Cities had to offer. In the heart of the cities, it was the kind of the place more friendly to coffeeshop hipsters and vegans than hunters. Although I occasionally camped with my new college friends, hunting was something I rarely thought or talked about. Nobody would know I'd ever hunted at all, unless I deployed the fact as the ace up my sleeve for those icebreaker moments.

In response to the sharp decline in hunting participation, outdoor institutions across the U.S. have desperately rolled out recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) campaigns to try to fight the decline in hunting, with varying rates of success. Some of these programs target certain populations, such as college students and people living in urban areas.

Even as overall hunting numbers decline, certain sectors are showing noticeable growth. Women in particular are participating in the sport more often, as are people of color.

At the moment, hunting is overwhelmingly white. Ninety-seven percent of all hunters are Caucasian; according to the USFWS 2016 report, 2 percent of hunters identified their race as "other," and African Americans and Asians were deemed too statistically insignificant to quantify. Native Americans don't appear in any survey category at all. However, the U.S. Census projects that by 2044, fewer than half of the U.S. population will be white. Will the demographics of hunters reflect this change? Or will the established pattern prevail, even as the population shifts?

Hunters come from a range of racial groups and economic backgrounds, and there is no question that a certain amount of privilege is involved. At its most basic, hunting requires a firearm safety certification course, purchase of a hunting license, and a reliable firearm or weapon of choice. Need for wide variety of other tools and conditions (such as the ownership of a vehicle or transportation to the hunting area) are also likely. It requires access to hunting land, and perhaps most importantly, time free of work and obligations to spend on the hunting grounds, preparing for and undergoing the pursuit.

I was lucky in that I inherited most of these things. The firearms I use belong to my father, who got them from his Uncle John. The land I hunt on belongs to my family, and I have unquestionable permission to be there. The jobs I've had have been flexible, allowing me to work remotely from my hunting camp or giving me paid vacation time. I've inherited a built-in support network: my dad, my relatives, and their friends, who are willing and happy to aid me with any help I may need in the field.

Without this ease of access, I almost certainly would never have become a hunter. Hunters who don't come from a background like mine, where hunting is already an established part of my family life, must do an extraordinary amount of work to establish the system they need to become a successful hunter. You can hunt alone, and many do, but hunters often speak of how much they value the networks and relationships they've forged with others as part of their hunting community.

For years, my busy college lifestyle was my excuse *not* to hunt. My dad invited me every year, but I declined, claiming I was too busy with the student newspaper, which I helped assemble every weekend.

After I graduated, my writing experience landed me a job at my hometown newspaper. Although journalism can make for erratic work hours, I finally had more of a regular schedule, and therefore, more time to hunt. One of my college friends had become interested in hunting, so he joined us at our family deer camp in 2016.

That year, I finally learned how to pull the trigger.

As with most hunters' first kill, the story of my first buck is one infused with a potent brew of thoughts and emotions, so I've saved it for a little later in this volume. The most important thing is that I learned that I was, in fact, capable of intentionally taking an animal life, and although the conflict still existed and remorse was definitely present, I could actually allow myself to feel a little pride in the achievement.

I joined my dad again in 2017, this time taking a small doe. The doe once again dragged me into an undercurrent of doubt. I was proud of the heart shot I took that dropped her instantly, but when I cautiously approached her body, a crawling wave of discomfort engulfed me. She was hardly bigger than Rudy, our family dog.

"Don't worry about it," my fellow hunters told me. "Besides, little does have the tenderest meat."

I took the tenderloins from my tender doe home and prepared them wrapped in bacon with a cover of sautéed peppers and onions and a side of mashed potatoes. I looked at the gleaming, tantalizing hot meal on my plate, full of unexpected bright colors. Food to be admired. Food to be considered.

This is better, I thought. I feel better about this.

In 2018, my life was moving in a new direction. I loved journalism, but found myself drawn again and again to topics related to the natural world. I haunted the offices of the local watershed district, and took any excuse to make the 45-minute drive up to the Wildlife Science Center, where I could stand eye to eye with rescued gray wolves. Following the impulse, I applied for an environmental studies graduate program at the University of Montana, and moved to Missoula in 2018. Hunting once again fell off my radar, even as I marveled at the wild richness of my new home state, where I caught glimpses of elk herds beside the highway and stumbled upon grouse strutting fearlessly on dirt mountain roads.

Living in Missoula, I found myself faced with new hunting questions that had never occurred to me before. Missoula brings a strange mix of people together: native Montanans with longstanding community pride, West Coasters who move in state to attend the university, flyfishers, ranchers, conservationists, vegetarians, hippies, Trump supporters. As a teaching assistant, I taught an introductory writing class, and learned firsthand from one of my students, Christian, how his perspective on hunting completely reversed after moving to Missoula. Noting the types of bumper stickers on Priuses in this tiny blue island of a city, he was surprised to meet the type of people who might be considered bleeding-heart conservationists and find out they were also hunters. Not only were they hunters, they had many sensible reasons for participating in the sport. My student decided to give it a try himself, and found a new passion he never would have considered at an earlier time in his life.

I was fascinated by hunters like Christian. During his youth, there were no expectations, no family pressures, but there were also no opportunities. What made people like him feel so strongly about hunting that they decided to pick up a gun and try it for themselves?

For most new hunters, hunting is a very deliberate choice; one that is not made lightly. At its heart, it is the choice to pursue and take the life of an animal, an act that is considered reprehensible to some.

The motivation to hunt is different for each individual. *Omnivore's Dilemma* author Michael Pollan wanted to closely examine the social and moral ramifications of his food sources. Lily Raff McCaulou wanted to connect more intimately to her new community, as she details in her book *Call of the Mild*. Some do it to spend quality time

with family and friends. Many hunters are motivated by the chance to draw closer to nature, as well as to their roots as human animals. And of course, many are motivated by the promise of a gleaming pair of antlers to hang on the wall.

As a young hunter, I wanted desperately to believe that hunters weren't in it purely to glory in the death of animals and show off their kills as trophies. Many people hunt unabashedly for these reasons, which sometimes makes the label of "hunter" repulsive to me, since it describes me, and my dad, and game-farm trophy hunters, and poachers too.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are hunters with a towering standard of ethics—the ones who hunt to be conscious of where their food comes from, to support wildlife habitat, to better themselves as humans. I've read several accounts from vegans and vegetarians who thoughtfully examined the systemic cost of their chosen diet and found that hunting for their own meat was actually one of the best ways to address their concerns.

Of course, as R3 programs grow, hunting is also enjoying a certain trendiness. A *New York Times* article titled "Fly Fishing is the New Bird Watching" caused a bit of a splash in the Missoula community, especially since it reduced what is more or less the Montana state sport to some kind of casual post-brunch activity. The article begins with the words "Step aside, goat yoga."

Matt Dunfee of the Wildlife Management Institute explained the phenomenon for a 2019 article in *Outdoor Life*.

"Hipsters want to hunt, but they don't want to hunt the same way a rural farm boy from Illinois wants to hunt," Dunfee said. "They don't want to dress the same way, they

don't like focusing on antlers, they don't like taking pictures of their animals. But they want local, sustainable, ecologically conscious meat. And within our efforts, there are few places to realize those values."

I've asked my dad again and again what it is about hunting that makes it his favorite thing, what makes it worthwhile, coming back to the woods to sit in the cold winter dark again and again. As best as I can figure out, he just likes to hunt. The whole experience of it. Every moment sitting motionless in the tree stand with chickadees daring to perch on his hand is as likely to become a hunting story as the actual moment of truth, the successful kill. It's not about any particular kind of conservation values, or shortening the food chain. He takes it for what it is.

By the time I was nearing the end of my first year in graduate school in Missoula, I started looking for something to keep me busy for the summer. Something made me think of the wolf pawprint in the snow, all those years ago. I found the website for Deep Portage Conservation Learning Center, and saw they were hiring camp counselors. I'd never worked at a summer camp, but I'd attended plenty, and had lots of outdoor experience. I sent in an application, on the off chance. A week later, I spent about 15 minutes on the phone with the camp's executive director, Dale, and I was hired.

I didn't know much about Deep Portage's summer camp program, but I remembered the incredible weekend I'd spent there as a child that November weekend. I remembered starting fires from scratch in the woods and learning survival skills among

the drifts and bare branches. I remembered big dinners under the vaulted ceiling of a lodge-style dining room. I remembered howling like wolves beside a frozen pond that glowed silver-white under the light of a full moon.

If it was anything like I remembered, I couldn't imagine a better way to spend my summer. I wrapped up my studies and packed up my car to drive back across the Rocky Mountains to the Minnesota northwoods. I had no idea that in a matter of weeks, among all the wolf howling and dining hall jokes and orienteering and survival skills, part of my job would also be teaching kids the skills they needed to hunt and kill wild game.

I arrived at Deep Portage on a hot June day, while the sun was high. The camp was a two-and-a-half-hour drive from the Twin Cities, northwest through miles and miles of farm fields, and then the tiny lake towns with their water towers painted sharp red and white like Paul Bunyan's bobber.

The camp itself lay at the end of a two-mile dirt driveway, twisting through dense forest. I was among half a dozen other people, summer counselors like me, who had arrived early to help out with the Side X Side shooting competition, an annual fundraiser. I'd volunteered for the event when Neal, the camp program director, asked if anyone was willing to earn some extra money by arriving a few days early to assist.

"I'd be happy to do it," I'd written back, hoping to make a good impression. "I actually have my firearm safety certificate and shooting experience." As an academic and a writer during the rest of the year, how often would I get to use that fact as a credential?

Upon my arrival, I was introduced to a handful of other summer counselors who had volunteered their time for the day—my coworkers for the next 10 weeks. We finagled rides down the long gravel road to the camp's firing range, where Neal showed

us around the shotgun course—our office for the day. It was a circuit with rickety wooden shooting stations positioned against steep hillsides, amid clouds of mosquitoes in the damp of the dark woods. Although automatic clay launchers exist, the Deep Portage machines had to be operated by hand, so each of us was assigned to work a different station on our own. So summer camp began not with camp songs and marshmallows, but shotgun shells and ear plugs.

We spent a week in training, getting to know each other and mastering the camp activities we'd be teaching the kids. Every day, it became clearer that my shooting and hunting experience would be much more useful here than I'd initially realized.

Deep Portage's weeklong summer camps were designed specifically to teach kids how to hunt. In partnership with programming from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), we prepared the kids to receive their hunter safety certificates during the course of the week. We'd spend our days in a mixture of entertaining camp activities (such as canoeing, orienteering, and rock wall climbing) with elements of the firearm safety exam (such as demonstrating they can safely handle and carry a firearm, properly firing a weapon, and shooting from four different positions.) At the end of the week, the kids gathered in the dining hall with #2 pencils and multiple-choice answer sheets to take the written exam. Thursday nights were thick with tension as the kids worried over whether they'd passed. The air broke and bubbled with noise and energy when Neal invariably announced that everyone would be going home with their gun safety certification. On Sundays, a fresh batch of 100 campers would arrive and we'd start all over again.

We had the occasional girl or two in the group, but for the most part, our campers were boys. They had a wide range of experience: some had never shot a gun and shied away from the firearms; others came out of the womb with a pistol in each hand and complained about the limited offering of weaponry on our gun range. In the course of the summer, I met 12-year-olds who could, and had, taken the life a deer as coolly as they could swing a yoyo. Their unabashed enthusiasm for shooting, their bright-eyed, single-minded joy of the hunt was baffling to me, who had always weighed hunting and everything it meant in such heavy uncertainty. There were no questions for these boys, except for "When do we get to shoot?"

I'd never had the option to shoot at Deep Portage when I was young; during the winter, the firing range is closed and buried beneath feet upon feet of snow. I'd been older than these boys when I first took my gun safety course, and was first confronted with what it meant to have the power to kill another being. All I'd known in these woods as a child was that I walked in the world of animals, and that I must respect them.

Here I stood on the same ground again, back at the beginning, hearing myself explain to children how to tell if a deer was lungshot or heartshot from the color of blood spatters. It was one thing to hold my personal conviction about hunting. But this was the next generation of people carrying guns into the woods, and I had a hand in putting them there.

In the years since I first ran my hands over the oiled stock of a gun, I have had time to think about why I hunt, and what it means to be a hunter of the future, to be a teacher of the hunters of the future, to be my kind of hunter. In so doing, it is likely I have stumbled into a deer path that leads me through the glories of clover meadows and

tadpole creeks, past wild onions and stinging nettles and the fruit of the wood rose, and yet the end of which I will never find.

Chapter 1: A Gendered History of Hunting



Scaling fish is one of my earliest memories. I remember a summer evening sitting on the hard wooden bench on the deck on the side of our suburban yard. I remember the feeling of the loose scales, waxy and thin, like flattened corn kernels, stuck to my hands.

I knew my dad loved fishing—he talked about it in all his stories of wondrous summers so far north of our home, at Mille Lacs Lake. The idea of catching walleye

never excited me. Why would it? I'd never caught one. But whatever seemed exciting to my dad seemed exciting to me. And he asked me to scale the fish, so here we were scaling away under the porch light.

We didn't go fishing together often, but a few of my oldest memories are from those times. There must have been something perfectly novel, or that felt too important to forget, on these occasions. Once, my dad encouraged me to hold a little sunny he'd caught. Sometimes, he'd hold one up close to my face so I could give it a little fish kiss before he let it go. I liked animals and I liked to touch the fish, but when I took this one in my palm, its spiky dorsal fin stiffened and bit into my palm like a volley of needles.

My hands instinctually flung the fish away, and I remember hearing the unsettling *thunk* of the fish's small, bony body as it hit the dock. I may have cried; I'm not sure. My dad scooped it up and it wiggled away, perhaps stunned, but mostly unharmed.

From then on, I had no interest in handling the fish. But I still wanted to go along with my dad. It was the being there that was important. And there were other things to do there besides fish. Sometimes, we'd bring stale bread to the fishing dock on White Bear Lake. By now my younger brother was old enough to join us, and we delighted in throwing bread into the clear water and watching pumpkinseeds dart from their hiding places and swallow them down. Sometimes, a flock of wheeling white gulls showed up and amazed us with their ability to catch the bread we tossed right out of the air.

We went fishing less and less often as my brother and I got older and busier, but when he brought back his fish from a trip to Rainy Lake—the walleyes he's always after—we all came out to the garage in our pajamas in the dark. He had his coolers of fish

and put them on the cool cement garage floor; he opened them up and let us see the wondrous catch.

The walleyes were alive. I hadn't expected that.

He placed a few of them on the ground and we leaned over close to see. They were bigger than sunnies—longer, more elegant, like snakes. Distressed, the fish wobbled, coiling and tensing their bodies in a way I'd never seen a living creature do. Trying uselessly to flap themselves back into familiar terrain.

One suddenly flung itself into the air, close to me. I screamed, but then giggled. When I saw how it made Dad and Mom laugh, I did it again, shrieking each time a fish popped into the air. All of us laughing.

Years later, he told me he still remembered how funny it was when I screamed in fear of the fish.

Now it gives me pause. Did he really think I was afraid of the fish? I'd helped him scale them, and I gave them kisses on the city dock. It worries me that underneath those things was the kind of girl most people expect for a daughter—the kind of girl who can be teased with things crawly and slimy, who, after all, is a girl.

Hunting has been divided among gender lines for thousands of years. In hunter-gatherer cultures across the centuries, men and women have commonly adopted complementary roles in the gathering and preparation of game animals for meat, goods, and tools. In many cultures, men are the primary meat hunters, while women tend and

gather food sources closer to habitation, but these drawn lines have not always been strict, nor even the norm in some places.

So in America's recent memory, why do men almost always seem to be the hunters, and women the gatherers? After all, females of many animal species almost always hunt for themselves and their offspring. The commonly accepted theory is simple biology: as the producers of offspring, women are more likely to be consumed with pregnancy, breastfeeding, and raising small children. Human babies are almost completely helpless for an extraordinarily long period of time compared to say, a lion cub, who can participate in hunts at the age of 11 months.

Without the responsibilities of child rearing, men had the freedom to pursue game animals over long distances, far from the communal group. While the men were off procuring hunks of large game meat to bring home as sustenance, women and children gathered other food sources nearby the camp, including edible plants and small game.

Division of labor may have been one of humanity's most important saving graces. The authors of a 2006 paper in *Current Anthropology* hypothesized that failure to specialize social roles contributed to the eventual extinction of Neanderthals. Anthropologists noticed that ancient human campsites often include skeletons of small animals and tools used to process foods, indicating that they were eating more than the meat brought home by hunters. Similar items were absent from Neanderthal sites. So what were Neanderthal women doing, if they weren't staying in camp, making tools, preparing vegetables, or cooking small animals? Most likely, they were assisting the men in the hunt. But when game became scarce, there was no other food source for Neanderthals to fall back on. Unlike humans, who turned to plants and small game in

times of scarcity, Neanderthals starved, reducing population numbers and eventually contributing to the extinction of their race.

Humans, meanwhile, had figured out what it took to get through hard times by dividing up their sources of nourishment. Once they figured out what worked best, they held onto their formula for success tightly.

Human culture has shifted almost unrecognizably between then and now, but the concept of man the hunter, woman the gatherer still shapes the gendered behavior of modern humans. Thanks to modern technology, such as high-powered rifles, the need for the tallest, fastest, non-childbearing people to bring down game animals has been practically eliminated. Biology of the individual hunter is nearly irrelevant.

But old habits die hard. As effective as we've become at efficiently bringing down large game, it seems we haven't quite designed the right tools to bring down certain cemented ideas about women, men, and the hunt.

My mother's six brothers all grew up hunting alongside their father on their farm in rural Wisconsin. Some of the brothers were more than 20 years apart in age, but hunting together is something they've always shared. My mom was one of the youngest in the household, and remembers how her father and brother would band together with community neighbors during hunting season. A few times, she was recruited for deer drives—a hunting method in which one group of shooters remains stationary, and a group of drivers walks side by side through the brush to push deer out of hiding toward the hunters. It can be a dangerous practice, but it was the norm in our family. As a teenager, I

also found myself recruited for deer drives by my uncles if I happened to be in the right place and seemed bored and idle enough. Drivers tended to be less experienced hunters, sometimes even non-hunters, like my mom. A spare pair of legs was in high demand.

Mom never hunted with her relatives. “I cannot shoot something alive,” she told me. She went through the gun safety course along with my brother to get a better understanding of guns and marksmanship, but chooses not to hunt.

Her brothers, on the other hand, often use hunting as a social occasion. They take long turkey hunting trips together across the Great Plains, or meet up at what has become a yearly tradition: a family pheasant hunt the day after Thanksgiving.

Talk between my uncles often centers around hunting, or their other shared interest, construction. This makes conversation at family functions somewhat inaccessible to someone without experience in either area of expertise, and is why I mostly avoided conversation with my uncles if possible. Also because they tended to tease me, which felt mean and unwarranted to me as a youngster. I didn’t know as a child that my mom found these conversations just as frustrating and exclusive.

“It’s like if you get together with a group of people and they all play softball and you don’t play softball,” my mom said. “It just happened that hunting and building houses was the topic of conversation.”

With no easy in for someone who lacked the knowledge to do anything but watch responses ping back and forth without anything to contribute. My mom thought maybe her disinterest in hunting stemmed from a lack of patience on the part of the experienced hunters who might have served as good mentors, not to mention a difference in communication style.

“They’re not good teachers,” she said. “They explain it once and if you can’t do it, too bad. There wasn’t that patience of anybody I encountered. My dad was a very patient man. If I’d have shown an interest, I’m sure he would have helped me along with that.”

I wasn’t aware of any of this as a kid. All I knew was that my dad and my uncles went pheasant hunting together every year at Thanksgiving, and my mom and aunts stayed home.

So my first experiences with hunting were born out of the simple, intense desperation not to be left out. When my father joined my uncles on a hunting trip to North Dakota one autumn, he returned with a pack of developed photos from a disposable camera. He showed me underlit, blurry pictures of uncles and pickups and dead birds and the endless, dreary, treeless moonscape of North Dakota.

"They say if your dog takes off running out there, it'll take three days before you can't see him anymore," Dad said.

Then he shuffled to a shot he knew I'd like. At first glance, it appeared to be nothing but gray earth and the sharp, horizontal line where it met dusky sky.

"Look," he said. "It's a wild horse." I had to squint to make out the blurred form of the animal in the far distance of the shot. It was facing away from the camera, galloping toward the horizon, but I could make out the windblown mop of a mane, the round speckled rump.

I'd never been particularly curious about any of my dad's hunting trips before, but suddenly, I felt that I'd missed something enormous. My dad had been to land where wild

horses roamed, where the wind scoured, and pheasants hid somewhere in the vast emptiness of it all. Hunting was apparently more than disappearing to the woods to shoot things. It was something bigger.

I stared at the horse, thinking.

My dad's truck rattled as he pulled off the rutted road into a Wisconsin corn field. I stepped out into a blast of ice wind and immediately leaned back into the cab and shut the door while I watched uncles and cousins and dogs spill out from their own haphazardly parked vehicles nearby. Pickup gates were lowered, shotguns extracted, heavy vests with many pockets donned.

My extended family held this same pheasant hunt every year, always the day after Thanksgiving. In years past, I hadn't the faintest incentive to join the hunt: pheasants were pretty low on my list of exciting animals, all of my male cousins were a lot older than me, and I hated loud, percussive noises. I could hardly even watch the fireworks on the Fourth of July.

But my attitude changed the year my younger brother was invited along. It set me simmering. Why should Steven get to go and not me? What was wrong with me? I was older, after all. Despite the many reasons I might have declined the opportunity (see above), I was incensed not to have been even considered a potential participant. It's nice to be asked.

I don't remember what exactly I said to my dad, but that year was the first time Steven and I tagged along with the family hunting party.

When it seemed like everyone was finally ready, I stepped again into the biting air and colorless corn field, stickled with the hard remnants of cornstalks. I shied away from the older cousins and uncles—I didn't know half their names, never mind what to even talk to them about.

I was encouraged, however, by the presence of my cousins Stacy and Sarah, the only other girls there. No aunts, no moms. Just the three of us, among twenty or so male relatives. Stacy was a few years older and already knew a lot more about hunting than I did, so I was shy even around her. But Sarah was exactly my age, and we'd been best buddies almost since birth. The two of us stuck together and mostly giggled our way across the farm fields.

It was easy enough to follow my dad's directions: stay in line with everyone else and stop when we shoot. In later years, I'd carry a borrowed shotgun, but for our first year, we were purely observers.

For a while, the spectacle of loping dogs, shouting men, and erupting birds kept us entertained. But a 12-year-old girl can only walk so far in a straight line across a cornfield without getting bored to tears and half frozen. I begged my dad for the keys to the truck, and convinced Sarah to turn back with me and sit in the warm cab instead.

The hunters worked their way up and down the field for the next hour, and traipsed back to the car pulling the limp, colorful forms of pheasants from the oversized pockets on their enormous coats and vests.

I tried not to look too close or think about it too much when the hunters laid out their bounty, bejeweled with red eye crests and gorgeous striped tailfeathers, on the tailgates of their trucks. That evening, my curiosity brought me to the sink in the laundry corner of our basement, where I knew Dad was cleaning the birds, but again, I feared looking too closely and seeing something that disturbed me. Yet this was something I'd read about in books, skinning and de-feathering. Preparing a dead animal for its next stage: our meal. The following day, we were able to enjoy the birds at our dinner table.

Pheasant wasn't among my favorite things to eat, because I knew the sensation of biting down on a hard, gritty piece of toothbreaking birdshot. But my dad said he'd also brought home a quail; it wasn't any more likely to be free of birdshot, and there was only a little bit because it was such a tiny bird, and he didn't know how it would taste, but I could try it if I wanted.

I imagine it was simply stewed in a can of cream of mushroom soup, but I can still recall the sweet, tender flavor of dark quail meat on my tongue. It may have been one of the best meals I've eaten in my life. I polished off the rest of the soft little morsels, immensely satisfied.

Was this what hunting was all about?

At that time, I didn't care if I ever shot a bird myself, but I learned that sitting in the car singing Christmas carols was as much a part of the adventure as following bird dogs through open terrain. Whatever might happen on the next hunting trip, I knew I definitely wanted to be there.

In Euro-American history, hunting often had more to do with class divisions than gender divisions. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance period, queens, princesses, and noble ladies often hunted, embodying the mythic figure of Diana, the mythological goddess of the hunt.

When the first European settlers arrived in the New World, many were drawn by the commercial opportunities of the plenteous game and fish available. However, as Tovar Cerulli notes in his book *The Mindful Carnivore*, hunting stories are conspicuously absent from colonial records. Many of the colonists were Puritans who frowned upon such a violent practice, and most relied completely on agriculture to sustain them. Hunting was an activity associated with the "uncivilized" natives of the continent.

"It could be enjoyable, as a diversion," Cerulli wrote. "As a way of life, however, it was barbaric and indolent, posing a threat to the industrious foundations of agrarian civilization."

It took a long time to improve the reputation of hunters. The effort was helped along in the 1800s and early 1900s by the emergence of historic figures such as Daniel Boone and Theodore Roosevelt. As outdoor publications continued to extol the virtues of hunters around the turn of the 19th century, they turned to a surprising solution: women.

The presence of women in hunting camps was a handy way to "soften" the appearance and reputation of hunters to those critical of hunting sports, as Mary Zeiss Stange explained in her introduction to *Heart Shots: Women Write About Hunting*.

When fox hunting received widespread public backlash in late 1800s Great Britain, popular outdoor magazines and hunting publications countered by highlighting

the participation of women. "This in turn not only encouraged more women to take up the sport (with the desired moderating effect on male hunters' comportment, especially when those hunters were their spouses), it also had the hoped-for effect of raising public levels of approval for fox hunting," Stange wrote.

The same method appears to have worked in the U.S. a few decades later, where women's presence was used to show the modern appeal of the sport while also maintaining its atavistic appeal. "Casting sport hunting women as new-fashioned allowed these magazines to negotiate the tension between the modern and anti-modern impulses inherent in both sport hunting and conservation," writes historian Andrea Smalley. "Sportsmen could associate certain aspects of modern hunting with femininity while still envisioning men's hunting as a direct link to some primitive past."

Women were encouraged to write and share their own hunting perspectives; many of them sympathetic to prey animals and emotionally vulnerable in a way few male writers chose to express themselves. While women writers covered the sentimental facets of outdoor sports, men focused on the practical, logistical side of things, creating two sides of an elaborate rhetoric designed to sweeten hunting sports to the public taste. "Female-authored hunting narratives tinged with remorse conveyed the idea that recreational hunters were humane individuals who acted with restraint, respected wildlife, and understood its intrinsic value," Smalley wrote.

Things changed drastically after the Second World War. As soldiers returned home, the American household aggressively reclaimed the stability of a nuclear family structure, gender roles increased in rigidity, and women were regarded as homemakers, while men were breadwinners. Girls and women were discouraged from pursuing outdoor

sports. "Fathers took their sons out, as part of a male rite of initiation, and the men-only hunting camp was ironically depicted as a safe haven, a refuge from the females back home," Stange explained. As women expanded into the workforce in the following decades, hunting camps were more and more regarded as one of the last secure refuges of masculinity.

It wasn't until the 1990s that the number of women hunters began to climb once again. Since most of them hadn't received instruction in hunting sports as children, they learned as adults. They faced the particular challenges of pushing into a male-dominated space and also being adult novices: more often humiliating than not. Their decision to join the hunting community presented them with a complicated slew of social and psychological repercussions from hunters and non-hunters alike. Animal rights discussions had emerged prominently, and hunting was once again in need of some good press to sway public opinion. "The anti-hunting arguments animal rights activists tended to use...depended on age-old stereotypes of female weakness and nonviolence on the one hand, and male rapaciousness (the 'slob hunter') on the other. The sheer fact of women's hunting flew in the face of these arguments," Stange wrote.

Today, women hunters are more prominent than ever before. They appear on television shows and have written many popular books. But there is no doubt that in the current moment, hunting is still a world largely shaped by men, and that there are a multitude of ways women must adapt to achieve inclusion and acceptance.

I noticed a stark change in my peers when I entered middle school—many of my friends developed what seemed to me to be completely sudden and baffling interests in boys, makeup, clothing from Aeropostale, and the other hallmarks of teenage girlhood. To me, these interests appeared shallow and irrelevant: I was still mostly interested in wolves and frogs and reading books, the same as always. What good could boys or makeup or clothing do for any of those things?

Though I am a cisgender woman, I have long been drawn to androgynous gender presentation in a way that undeniably set me apart from my peers: always a confusing thing for a teenager. Hunting gave me an outlet to comfortably explore this facet of my identity, even if I wasn't really sure what I was doing at the time. I just knew it felt right not to have to worry about the way I looked around the hunting camp.

I wasn't the first woman to find this particular outlet for gender presentation, and I won't be the last. Although their stories are not easy to find—for many reasons—hunting sports have historically provided a small niche for members of the LGBTQIA+ community to explore facets of gender presentation. In her collection, Stange described the life of Paulina Brandreth, who published many articles in outdoor news publications under the name Paul in the 1930s. "It is unclear whether she did this because it was easier for her to publish as a male or because of a tendency toward transexuality; most likely, both factors were at work," Stange wrote.

Like Paulina, I indulged in the opportunity to dress in a way that was comfortable to me. In hunting spaces, it wasn't odd at all if I didn't dress in skirts or do my hair or put on makeup. In fact, it made sense. I fell much too easily into the "not like other girls" mentality, regarding my female-presenting peers as shallow and stupid. Years later, in

college, I would take a class on gender and communication and finally understand the complete derision I felt for other girls my age as a symptom of a deeply entrenched patriarchal society. It took a long time for me to repair the damage I did to my own perception of femininity.

As a teenager, what I admired far more were skills typically associated more with boys. I was jealous of my brother's Cub Scout troop activities, which seemed to revolve much more around outdoor skills than anything in my Girl Scouts troop ever had. Whenever possible, I tagged along to Boy Scout functions, seething with jealousy over the fact that the boys got a symbolic arrow, fletched with real turkey feathers, as part of their honor ceremony. Every one of my Girl Scout honors came in the form of either a patch, or a sash: pitifully domestic, in comparison.

I got my first opportunity to shoot when I joined my father and brother on a Boy Scout family weekend camping trip to Phillippo Scout Camp. I was out of place: a girl at a Boy Scout camp. My brother and his friends ran riot around camp, chasing each other in endless nameless games. As dusk came over the campsites, a dark flicker swooped near enough to touch over the damp evening meadow.

"Oh cool, a bat!" My shout drew my brother and a few others nearer to investigate.

A sibling of one of my classmates looked at me. "I thought girls were afraid of bats."

A spike of anger coursed through me instantly. It was the same as the fish. Did he think that being a girl gave me some automatic, intractable terror of scuttling creatures?

"Not me," I said.

When we went to the gun range the following afternoon, most of the families hung back while their boys tried out shooting under the watchful eye of the troop masters. Since there was room, I was allowed to sit near my brother and try it out for myself.

BB guns are kind to first-time shooters; easy to use, without the great disruptive bang in your ear. I did not think of shooting this gun as using a weapon. I thought of it only as an opportunity to prove to my brother and these boys that I was as good as they were. I didn't fear bats, and I could shoot, too.

I remember the intense focus of lining up the sights with the circles on the target, doing my best to hold steady and shoot true.

The rangemaster formally announced that the range was closed. Steven and I were allowed to collect our targets, which were both pretty average. The number of torn pinpricks didn't even match the number of rounds we'd been given.

"But look at that cluster," Dad said, pointing to the scatter of rips on each of our sheets where the tiny BBs tore through. "Looks like the gun was leaning left. You did pretty good."

In a matter of months, I was enrolled in a gun safety course at Joe's Sporting Goods off Highway 36. My cousin Sarah and I went together on weeknights, doodling in our notebooks while rotund, balding police officers lectured us about the types of actions and the dangers of shooting at flat surfaces.

The Minnesota hunter safety certification course includes a field day component, where each student has to demonstrate their competence with firearms at a local firing range. Coincidentally, my dad was not available to drive me to my field test, because he had volunteered as Range Master for a Boy Scout shooting event that he and Steven were

attending on the same day. He'd managed to get us both invested in the sport he loved most, but I felt his absence that day, shooting in the rain. I passed with flying colors; my target was even pretty impressive. I'd improved since my first shots that day at Phillippo Scout Camp.

For me and for most women hunters I know, hunting spaces occupied by men are mostly welcoming. Few of us have been directly discouraged from participating in the sport and taking down our own game. Awareness of our own "other"-ness comes through in subtler, often unintentional ways. Little things that stick with you a lot longer than they should.

I asked my cousin Sarah if she had ever experienced anything like this, and she recalled an incident when her dad took her along to the shooting range with a friend of his. When they arrived, the friend suggested that Sarah stay inside and play cards while the men practiced on the range.

Sarah was disturbed by the assumption. "I was like, no, I'm going to shoot," she said. At the same time, she sometimes liked to sit inside and play cards, and felt torn between a need to demonstrate her ability on the range and her desire to sit and enjoy herself in a different way, at the risk of being taken less seriously as a shooter.

Jen Cordaro of Sportmen's Alliance penned a blog post that outlined some of the intricacies of acting as a woman hunter amid mostly-male compatriots: "Some of the unwritten rules ladies have to follow when hunting with certain guys include: Don't be

better, don't question, don't be tougher, don't be more informed, don't get dirtier...than the guy who is helping you."

It was unconscious, but I knew this was the way I behaved around hunting camps. I was always much quieter than usual; waiting and watching, deferring to the older males in my hunting party to tell me what to do, where to be.

In her essay "On Men and Hunting Alone," Mary Stone expressed her frustration with the way male hunters frequently showed extra concern for her when they learned she was hunting on her own. The concern is often genuine, but it doesn't make it less patronizing, she pointed out.

"Many male hunters have assessed my outdoor skills as deficient based on only my gender," she wrote. "They have predicted I will die tragically and alone in the woods. I refused to surround myself with men who believed so steadfastly in my incompetence."

Although men are often encouraging, helpful, and patient with women who are new to hunting, the doubt cast on women hunters, no matter their level of experience, is in the very music in the air.

A couple weeks ago, I paid a visit to Missoula Home Depot. Country music was blaring through the warehouse loudspeakers, throwing me back in time to my brief country phase in high school, when I obsessed over *American Idol* and latched onto the type of shiny pop country that was immensely popular with stars like Carrie Underwood and Garth Brooks.

I marveled that the songs I was hearing today at Home Depot were the same as the ones I'd listened to ten years ago. As a new song began to play, I was reminded of why I eventually decided it was best if I stayed away from modern country music altogether.

This song by Brad Paisley begins with the words "When you see a deer you see Bambi/And I see a pair of antlers up on the wall." The song is titled "I'm Still a Guy," and goes on to list the various ways in which a woman's version of the world is pretty, clean, and soft (lakes are for picnics, etc.), and as much as a woman tries to "tame" and otherwise feminize a guy, he's still pretty macho at heart.

The lyrics become more and more problematic as the song goes on. When I heard this song as a teenager, I was hearing a million-dollar pop-chart-sanctioned depiction of how I was supposed to cry about Bambi and couldn't appreciate a nice antler display, on account of my lady parts.

I don't know how many country songs there are out there blasting similar gender assumptions, but it can't be too uncommon, since "I'm Still A Guy" spent 3 weeks as the No. 1 single on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart in May 2008.

Apparently Paisley played the song to his pregnant wife before he released it, since he was unsure how the female audience would respond. Maybe some of them had a better sense of humor about it than I did. It made his wife laugh.

Songs like this one are ubiquitously popular in the spaces hunters and outdoorsmen occupy. Driving around the northern lakes of Minnesota one winter a few years ago, my dad and I tuned into a local station that was broadcasting live updates from a nearby fishing contest. The broadcast was peppered with occasional songs, things like a

delightful little ballad called "The Thirty Point Buck." A little bit of humor all of us outdoor sports people could get behind. My dad and I were both laughing and joking at the silly programming.

But the next song on the docket was called "Like My Dog," by some guy named Billy Currington. "Like My Dog" spells out all the ways the singer's dog was better than the woman in his life, including how "he don't get mad at me and throw a fit/when I say his sister's a bitch." I don't think my dad even noticed the lyrics, but I felt my hair stand on end as I strained to hear clearly through the static. I wanted to get every last word of this.

The cute country charm seemed to dissipate from the cab. I stared out the window at the frozen lakes passing by, and didn't say anything for a while.

Though I often became defensive at the slightest sign of exclusion, wanting so badly to belong without questioning, I rarely thought about my presence among male hunters as a possible invasion. For decades, men's hunting camps provided "women-free" spaces where men could alter their behavior away from their spouse, partner, or family. Nearly everyone has the desire to get away once in a while; through the mid-20th century and occasionally today, this is what hunting camps represented for men.

In a 2018 paper in the *Journal of Rural Studies*, authors Stefano Giacomelli and Michael Gibbert conducted interviews with men and women hunters in Italy, where hunting is only just emerging as a popular sport for women. Giacomelli and Gibbert

suggest that even as men welcome women into hunting spaces, their interactions retain certain gendered norms that reinforce patriarchal behavior. In many ways, both men and women adopt "hybridized" gender performance traits: men share their hunting spaces at the risk of invasion because it "reinforces their ability to maintain command, exercise traditional gender roles, and nurture their masculinity," while women in hunting spaces "continue their venture for gender equality, but at the same time they accept men's agency and power in order not to lose social legitimacy." It reframes traditional gender roles, but ultimately operates in a patriarchal fashion, with men often retaining a dominant role. "Women push boundaries of what they are allowed to do, but they agree to remain under men's wings," Giacomelli and Gilbert write.

There are certainly cases where these gender dynamics play out differently, but I have observed this pattern among many of the women hunters I've talked to and interviewed, as well as in my own hunting experiences. Even in the U.S., women are often mentored by an older male relative or a male partner, a teaching relationship in which the man performs the role of instructor and the woman assumes the role of learner. In these hunting dynamics, the more experienced men often set up opportunities for success for the less experienced women hunters, and praise them highly and almost exorbitantly for shooting successes. Men often boast about the skill of their female hunting partners, especially their marksmanship.

We rolled into Medora, North Dakota, on a hot August evening last summer, when the setting sun flared desert pink across the Badlands. Although my dad is my

primary hunting companion, my mom is the one who likes to travel and see the world. She and I spent a couple days in town, visiting some of the historic sites, and carving back and forth on the winding roads of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Before his presidency, Roosevelt operated a cattle ranch in the area, and was joined by a growing community of wealthy Europeans, looking to make a dime on the cattle industry. Among them was the French nobleman, the Marquis de Mores, who built a glorious chateau on a hillside overlooking the town. He and his wife, Medora de Vallambrosa, the Marquise de Mores, spent summers there, hosting immense hunting parties that spent several days afield, slaughtering deer, pronghorn, bison, bears, and lions with unrestrained abandon. Medora accompanied her husband on many of his hunting trips, and quickly earned a reputation for herself as an accomplished hunter.

I found myself transfixed by the black leather of the noblewoman's sidesaddle and bullwhip, enclosed behind a pane of glass. They seemed to be filled with some kind of kinetic energy, as if they'd only just paused for a moment to be oiled, and would soon be riding tight and firm on the withers of a hunting horse once again. These items were bizarre here, absent of horse and rider.

A kettle of turkey vultures wheeled above the Chateau de Mores as we walked down the drive and entered at the back door to the dining room, with a table set for 12. The house was filled with expensive cutlery, custom bookshelves, delicate watercolors. One entire room was dedicated to hunting gear; it served as the base of operations while the Marquis and his buddies played at their "expeditions." These were truly the gentrified hunters.

Interpretive signs repeated the Marquis' boasts about his wife's skill with a rifle, but little else about her personality. I knew from moving through her roped-off bedroom that watercolors were one of her hobbies, and the names of her two children. Just a few years after the Marquis constructed the chateau, his cattle business failed, and the whole family moved back to France. They never returned to the Badlands.

I sidled up to the rail on the wraparound porch of the Chateau de Mores, where the successful hunting parties may have reclined with cigars and brandy on a fine, pink lemonade evening like this one. Was Medora among them? Or did she play hostess, while the men enjoyed their leisure? Or did she disappear inside to check on the children?

Here I was, finally, in the land of wild horses, the land my dad had disappeared to, where a dog could run for days without running out of sight. And at the same moment, here I was in the footsteps of a woman hunter, in a town that bears her name.

Chapter 2: The Literary Hunter



Long before I learned how to shoulder a rifle, before I'd ever stalked silently through the woods or seen the death of an animal, I'd already visualized it hundreds of times in my mind's eye.

I'd stalked through the marshes with Sam Gibley, treading slow and quiet, one foot straight in front of the other. I'd feasted on the bloody flesh of freshly killed caribou

with packs of Arctic wolves. I'd clambered into muddy beaver lodges, and pressed my toes into saltwater sands, looking for telltale bubbles of buried clams, despite never having seen an ocean.

As a small, shy kid at a suburban elementary school, books became a natural refuge for me, allowing me to venture far beyond the walls of my classroom without truly ever leaving my comfort zone. I didn't read these books because I was interested in hunting, but hunting was part and parcel of many of the adventure stories I was attracted to. The more I read, the more I built a working knowledge of natural ecology and survival skills.

I wanted to know everything I could about animals, especially wolves. Something about their graceful stature, their knowing eyes, sparked an intense interest for me. The thick boreal forest of Northern Minnesota is home to several packs of gray wolves, which I hoped to one day see in the wild. For the time being, I was content with photos in *Ranger Rick*. Everything in the school library was fair game, so I read things like *Hank the Cowdog* (a cartoon about a dog sheriff) and classics such as *The Call of the Wild* indiscriminately; unaware of which was a revered literary masterpiece and which was a humorous gimmick.

Alongside the stories of these animals were the stories of people, living their lives as best they can, often in spite of the worst challenges nature can unleash. I had an immense respect and sympathy for the animals I read about, but *Hank the Cowdog* in stride, I also gained a realistic portrait of how animals and people functioned as products of their natural systems. I never dreamed of killing an animal to eat it, but the rationale for doing so was evident and acceptable to me in nearly every book I encountered.

Few stories brought these things together as intimately as the heartbreaking classic *Where The Red Fern Grows*, which I read at age 12. I'd just started middle school and I remember reading under my desk in math class, trying to slump in my seat so no one could see how my eyes had become unstoppably watery as I turned the final pages. The story about a boy's bond with his two redbone hound dogs was appealing to my tastes, but the narrative was also centered strongly around hunting in a way few children's books are. The protagonist, Billy, and his dogs become accomplished hunters, participating in competitions for prize money that helps support Billy's family. But in addition to the joys of the hunt, Billy also exhibits extraordinary compassion when he takes the challenge to kill an elusive "ghost coon." Despite great effort to track down and tree this raccoon, Billy ultimately chooses to spare the animal, out of respect for its old age and wily intelligence. I'd never been presented with this depth of emotion as part of a hunting story before. From Billy's view, the appeal obviously ran deeper than taking pleasure in killing animals for sport. Billy's thoughtfulness and deliberation as a hunter showed that it was something more complicated, more meaningful, than I'd imagined.

Over the years, I've purchased my dad books on topics I know he enjoys, but I've never seen him actually read one. Every now and then I try again with a new book, with the delusion that this one might be different, but mostly I've accepted that my father is not the same kind of bookish person I am. I've heard him proudly say that he once read a

biography of Abraham Lincoln in high school, and I suspect it may be the last book he read.

It was difficult for me to imagine, but reading was always more of a chore for Dad, something to get through rather than enjoy. So it was a surprise to me, when I thought about it more, that in a way, even my dad's introduction to hunting and outdoor sports could be considered a literary one.

My high school graduation party was held in the garage of my parent's house, on the same cracked cement floor where my dad used to unpack his stringers of walleyes when he returned from fishing trips. I had balloons and a chocolate fountain, and a box full of cards, congratulating me on this milestone. There was a card there from my dad. I don't remember what it looked like on the outside, but inside, he'd written:

"Congratulations Jackie! Keep your nose in the wind and your eye on the skyline."

I'd heard him say that before. It was a quote from one of the old Westerns he referenced frequently: *Jeremiah Johnson*. I'd never really watched it beyond a scene or two, but I knew my dad had seen it dozens of times, based on how often he busted out a loosely quoted line or two. He particularly liked the turn of phrase of a particular bear-hunting mountain man and would imitate him, saying: "Can ya skin grizz?"

I didn't gain an appreciation for the Westerns he liked until I was a little older. What was so appealing about close-up shots of sweaty, silent men with gritted teeth? The only one he could get me to watch, if you could call it a Western, was *Dances with Wolves*. (Because it had a wolf). But my dad had grown up on them. He'd seen every Clint Eastwood film in existence, and developed an early respect for mastery of firearms and surviving among inhospitable conditions through films.

It wasn't until a few years after that graduation card that I actually watched *Jeremiah Johnson* all the way through. I bought my dad a DVD copy to keep at the hunting cabin. The 1972 film stars Robert Redford as a disenchanted Mexican War veteran who goes to the Rocky Mountains to make a new life for himself as a trapper. The story is loosely based on the life of John "Liver-Eating" Johnson, who gained his grisly nickname from the rumor that he had killed and eaten the livers of hundreds of Crow warriors in revenge for the death of his wife. *Jeremiah Johnson* is a revenge story, as many Westerns are, but it's also a story of survival and self-sufficiency that resonated with a number of hunters I know.

One of these hunters was Preston, a college friend who joined our hunting party in Wisconsin in fall of 2016. It had been seven years since I'd last hunted, and this was Preston's first hunting season ever. The night before season opener, we all jammed onto the raggedy couch and watched *Jeremiah Johnson* together.

Preston had seen it before. It was just one piece of media that fostered his interest in hunting when he was young, he told me when I asked him about it later. The character Jeremiah Johnson is basically a "city slicker," he said, coming from a place of no knowledge to thriving by living off the land. A new hunter's ideal path.

"I think that the growth he shows in that movie, from somebody who doesn't know what they're doing, stumbling around falling into trout streams, missing shots at wild game, to somebody who's basically a master of living off the land within the space of two hours is sort of an example of how we can learn from our mistakes and how spending more time in the wild allows us to do better," Preston said.

Intrigued by Preston's insights, I asked my dad what inspired him about the movie and was stunned to hear him repeat Preston's thoughts almost exactly.

"It shows the learning curve from being a greenhorn to being experienced," Dad told me. At its most basic story level, it was a narrative that he and other hunters recognized intimately as a reflection of their own journey.

After the movie ended, we slept hard, rose dark and early, and on opening morning, all three of us successfully shot our season buck within the first few hours of daylight. The three bucks could have been brothers. We were all shocked; the pleasure of our extraordinary good luck hung like sweet woodsmoke around the cabin all day. There's a photo of the three of us posed together in the yard that afternoon, bulky coats stripped off in the warm autumn sunshine, each holding up the head of our respective buck by the antlers.

There is something immensely satisfying about a hunting story. It is one of the oldest struggles, quantifiable, but with lots of room for variation, surprises, humor, and tragedy. It is one of the most basic versions of the "hero's journey" formula, the classic story structure which fuels so many of our favorite modern tales as well as ancient ones. The hero's journey typically involves a central character, the hero, who sets out on a journey, faces an adverse challenge, emerges victorious, and comes home changed from the experience.

Hunting has provided a space for human storytelling for as long as humanity has existed. Hunting and gathering food provided reason for early humans to band together

and form complex relationships. Although the origin of human language is widely speculated, some linguists hypothesize that it first emerged out of the necessity for hunters to communicate with each other before, during, and after the hunt.

Magura Cave, in Bulgaria, contains some of the worlds oldest cave paintings, created sometime between 6,300 and 3,000 B.C. These include scenes of hunting ceremonies; narratives important enough to record for future generations. From the beginning of art and communication, hunting stories have been an important part of the human experience.

The indigenous cultures of North America left similar artwork in the regions of my own hunting grounds of Minnesota and Wisconsin. The function of such petroglyph sites is speculated by anthropologists, but possible uses include territory markers, documentation of stories, graffiti, and hunting magic—a shamanistic practice, in which the symbol of game animals was created in order to draw more animals and increase the supply.

Oral history among modern North American indigenous cultures includes thousands of stories that reflect the relationship between humans and animals during the hunt. Many of them are encoded with specific lessons and morals about when it is appropriate to harvest game, and how to show respect and reverence to prey animals. This oral record tracked ecological knowledge about animals, and informed the way indigenous cultures intentionally conserved their resources long before the invention of the North American model of wildlife management.

Every hunting camp has its share of stories, personal and rumored, lighthearted and serious, shared over coffee pots, bunkrooms, and flatbed pickups. Every camp seems

to have its particular kinds of storytellers, too. Among those who show up for coffee in our cabin is my dad's old friend Richard Kane, a man who talks to compete with silence, and so proficient a storyteller that my family even sometimes performs imitations of his emphatic verbal habits in his absence. When I was young, I often struggled to find any interest in conversations between my dad and his friends, since they often dealt with topics completely outside of my experience. But I've listened to Richard long after my interest has evaporated, just to witness the animated power of his storytelling.

One particular story he likes to tell is that of "Mr. Campbell." He told it to me again recently:

For years, Richard hunted around a family property adjacent to Minnesota's Glendalough State Park. Though the area around the park is fair game, hunting is not permitted in the park itself. During one hunting season, Richard and his hunter partners noticed a loose dog running about, chasing deer. Legally, hunters are allowed to shoot dogs that chase deer, but hunters like Richard would rather find another solution before killing someone's family pet. The members of his hunting party called the local game warden, who promised he would talk to the owners of the dog.

One morning shortly afterward, Richard arrived at his usual deer stand and noticed a truck parked on the Glendalough side, which the hunters stayed away from. Through his binoculars, Richard could see there was a man sitting in the drivers' seat. Only poachers hunted in Glendalough, so he was naturally suspicious.

"The man in the truck started looking at me through binoculars, I was looking at him through binoculars," Richard said. "When I realized what he was doing, I flipped him the bird!"

In a moment, the man got out of his truck and began to approach. Richard didn't really want any trouble, so he left his gun propped near his stand and walked forward to meet him. As he got closer, he noticed the man's shiny badge. It turned out to be the very game warden, Mr. Campbell, who Richard and his hunting partners had called about the loose dog.

"Is that a new kind of sign language?" the warden asked.

"I thought you were poaching!" Richard told him. "Ya know, your truck wasn't there the other day. I saw you in the truck, but I couldn't see your badge!"

Mr. Campbell was surprisingly forgiving of the encounter; he visited with Richard and his hunting party while a successful hunter in the party took care of his kill. If there's nothing to stop Richard after telling that tale, he'll also launch into the part where Mr. Campbell asks the hunter to show him his license with hands bloodied from dressing his kill.

"I almost busted a gut laughing!" Richard said. "I don't think Mr. Campbell even looked at the license."

Personalities like Richard's loom large in hunting stories. Ordinary hunters can slip into an exciting array of archetypes: the adventurer, the risk-taker, the cautious one. I feel something of a thrill every time someone calls me *hunter*, *archer*, *trapper*, *shooter*. Like a Halloween costume, hunting stories allow you to become someone other than the person you might be during the off-season months.

Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, experienced a change in perspective when it came to telling his own first-time hunting story. He was surprised to discover how easily he fell into the exhausted clichés of "hunter porn," full of

descriptions of "reveling in primitivism," "barely concealed bloodlust," and "the whole macho conceit that the most authentic encounter with nature is the one that comes through the sight of a gun and ends with a large mammal dead on the ground."

But as he attempted to describe his own wild pig hunt, he found he could hardly write it any differently. "It may be that we have no better language in which to describe the experience of hunting, so that all of us who try sooner or later slide into this overheated prose ignorant of irony," he wrote.

I've talked with many hunters in the last few months; when prompted, every one of them has a story to share at a moment's notice. Most of the hunting stories I've heard aren't much about the kill at all, but about the strange characters that appear and the context created in the atmosphere of the hunt. Not everyone starts with *My Side of the Mountain*, but most hunters can refer to some work of film or literature, or even a family story, that made them want to become a great hunter.

Of all the stories that could possibly romanticize the notion of hunting for food, it surprises me that the one that sticks out in my memory is *The Swiss Family Robinson*. If not for my indiscriminating hunger for the written word, I might never have read it at all. The classics seemed old and stuffy to me as a child, so they were never high on my list. I suspect the book may have been prominently displayed in my local library, prompting me to pick it up. Written more than 200 years ago by Johan David Wyss, the story of a shipwrecked family's survival on an exotic island has enjoyed numerous adaptations. As

the Robinson family adjusts to their life on the island, they learn the workings of its ecosystem and the varieties of its native wildlife as a survival measure.

The story provides a thorough natural history, profiling fantastic fauna and flora with wondrous names: agouti, calabash. Every new paragraph is an opportunity for the Robinsons to take some unexpected delight in the bounty of their island home. In their first few days on the island, they feast on exotic foods such as lobsters, oysters, and coconuts. After a day out foraging, the narrator and one of his sons return to camp to find the mother of family engaged in "preparations for a truly sumptuous meal." Wyss goes on to describe a penguin cooking on a spit, "slowly roasting while the gravy dropped into a large shell placed beneath it. In the centre sat the great pot from which issued the smell of a most delicious soup. To crown this splendid array, stood an open hogshead full of Dutch cheeses."

These lavishly described meals of rich wild foods kept me turning the pages, dismissing Wyss' heavy-handed religious overtones and moral lessons in favor of the next decadent description I could find, the next picture of ease and contentment amid tropical splendor. But the lessons themselves are notable, as many of them outline a code of ethics related to hunting game and harvesting wild foods. The protagonist warns his sons to be conservative with their kills, and educates them about the natural ecosystem of the island. They develop a closeness to and appreciation for the land. As the family becomes accustomed to their untamed setting, the story shows how life can be lived *well* in a survival situation, how the family can not only survive but enjoy the experience of this island existence.

Examining my own literary history, I realized that this story counted strongly among the books I'd read and stories I'd heard that steered me into a place where hunting was—literally—palatable.

Similar to my experience with the *Swiss Family Robinson*, Preston told me he was first struck by the necessity of hunting to eat in the *Little House on the Prairie* books he read with his mother when he was young. Since many of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books took place in the same region we lived in, we'd both grown up reading them.

He remembered questioning his mother about Pa hunting for food in the first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*. "I remember my mom reconciling her strong anti-hunting perspective with that narrative by telling me that as long as you're hunting for food and you don't have another choice, and you're not doing it for sport, then that's okay," Preston said.

Stories such as this, in addition to some exposure to hunting activities through relatives, normalized hunting for Preston in much the same way it did for me. He watched his uncle Mark butcher a deer in the garage one Thanksgiving. "He told my cousin and me that if our parents were uncomfortable with it, they just needed to face the facts about where meat comes from."

When Preston decided he wanted to hunt for the first time, he knew his parents wouldn't be thrilled. He actually drafted a letter to his mom in order to break the news. He referenced what she'd told him about Pa Ingalls when he was young as one of his

points of defense. He and his mother still don't see eye to eye about his hunting activities, but in the last few years, Preston has easily become one of the most knowledgeable and deliberate outdoorsmen I know.

"What are you using?" one of the boys shouted in that easy way of practiced fishermen as he watched me haul a medium-sized large-mouth bass into my canoe. I was still surprised every time I hooked one of these fish, but what I learned that summer as a camp counselor was that the bass in Bass Pond were aggressive, stupid, and abundant. Despite the boys' constant comparative analysis of available lures, somehow even I could catch them without really trying.

"Spinner," I said.

"What kind?"

I didn't know. I never knew. It was just something I saw sitting in the tackle box my dad loaned me, something with a little color.

My fingers scraped against the fish's spiny mouth as I gripped it tight and began working the hook out with my other hand. Its black eyes made it look like an alien, but its long body glimmered with mossy greens and subtle yellows I'd never really appreciated before. I felt the small rip as the skin of its mouth tore over the barb, then let it sink back into the water, where its wonderful colors vanished into the jungle of lightless lilies and mud.

I was one of three counselors assigned to Fishing Camp that week; I think maybe because my enthusiasm for wildlife was already clear to camp organizers. But unlike my fellow counselor Joey, my fishing experience was pretty limited. I could tell a bass from a walleye well enough, but struggled to make a smooth cast. Just a few days beforehand, Joey showed me again and again, using leftover cord from a friendship bracelet, how to tie a clinch knot. We prepped our activities on and off the water, which included a fish identification game and an obstacle course that simulated the fish life cycle, but the Fishing Camp kids had no patience for these things.

“Why are we doing this?” They’d say. “This is a waste of time. This is Fishing Camp. Why aren’t we fishing right now?”

The whining stopped the instant we hit the water. Floating in their canoes, the kids conversed collegially; trading tips about gear and swapping big fish stories. Many of the kids were from the immediate area: a region studded with lakes and known for its excellent fishing. Some of them told me they’d even won local fishing tournaments. I’d prepped as best as I could for the week, reading up and studying the instructional books, but almost every single one of my campers was still more of an expert at fishing than I was. They simply had the upper hand in experience.

That evening on Bass Pond, I’m not sure if I ever answered the kid about my lure. He was one of dozens I had the same conversation with every day. I spent most the summer just trying to pretend like he and all his peers didn’t know more than me.

I read voraciously through high school, venturing for the first time into nonfiction. *Into the Wild* fed my teenage interest in just escaping it all, in spite of the grim end of Christopher McCandless, alone in the Alaska wilderness, starved and poisoned. What stuck with me was the idea of McCandless sleeping under the stars and open air on a bluff in Arizona, beholden to no one, living off nothing. A high school teacher loaned me a book called *Deep Survival* about the mental perspective and tactics of people who have endured extreme survival situations.

When I exhausted the reading material on my family's living room bookcase, I went to a dusty stack I knew I'd seen in the basement. Many of them were books my mom had bought for her father, Grandpa Charles. He died when I was five years old, so her gifts had come back to sit on our shelves until my nosing brought them into the daylight again. Included among them were more great adventure stories I didn't even realize I'd missed: *North to the Pole*, detailing Will Steger's unsupported sled dog voyage; *In the Teeth of the Nor'easter*, about sailing through storms on Lake Superior; and *Classic Minnesota Fishing Stories* by Joe Felleggy.

Minnesota, with its moniker as the Land of 10,000 Lakes, is a fishing state. Among the most revered and contested of fishing locales is Mille Lacs Lake. When we visited the cabin of my dad's friends there when I was a kid, Mille Lacs Lake was the closest thing I'd ever seen to an ocean, stretching away impossibly to the horizon. As a teenager, my dad worked for Joe Felleggy, a famed Minnesota fishing guide and writer, who operated a resort and guide service on Mille Lacs. It wasn't easy for me to get into *Classic Minnesota Fishing Stories*, because so many of them depended on a working knowledge of fishing equipment and tools.

Usually, I gathered new words like wildflowers, from the books I loved, but the language of real outdoor sportsmen was like being transported to an entirely different ecosystem. Without a clear explanation, or the context of supporting paragraphs, I could only hazard guesses at particular terms. Though I'd caught plenty of sunnies off the dock with live earthworms, I didn't have the practical experience to understand sport fishing like this. "In places you may feel a tinge of nostalgia while recalling an era when a favorite hot lure made its biggest splash!" Fellegy wrote in his introduction, reaffirming what I'd suspected: this book wasn't for me.

In an early chapter, Fellegy recorded the words of old-time fishing guide Harry Van Dorsen, who described the "Muskie Rampage" on Leech Lake in 1995: "Back then it was heavy trolling for the muskies, especially from the launches. But there was some casting too. They used all kinds of baits, everything like K-B and Doctor spoons, big plugs, bucktails—anything they could get, because this fishing took everyone by surprise. There wasn't that much tackle around! But I think the jointed Pikie Minnow was a little better than the rest."

Gibberish, to me. Firearms, also, were surrounded by mystifying vocabulary. Each one had a special sort of name that didn't seem to bear any relation to others: what was a carbine in relation to a Remington in relation to a .30-06? All of these were names for guns I'd heard people use, but couldn't for the life of me keep straight. Some were words, some were numbers, some were brands, some were years. Even after I took gun safety, handled every type of action, I was still mystified by the exact nature of the firearms under discussion.

So there was a limit, after all, to how much I could get from a book.

But I am a stubborn reader. In spite of my initial frustration, I knuckled down and tried to make what I could of *Classic Minnesota Fishing Stories*. I found that Fellegy's examination of the fishing story was a nuanced one. In his introduction, Fellegy outlines his aim to preserve some parts of this oral storytelling tradition, the fish story, and observes with care the way people talk about fishing "with an informal and relaxed lingo. You'll find exceptions, but when fishing becomes the topic of conversation many anglers, whether consciously or not, shift from a more disciplined English to a looser fishtalk."

I find myself switching to "fishtalk" of a sort when I meet the old-time hunters and fishermen in my communities, or anytime I'm forced to try to make small talk with my uncles. Politically and demographically, I'm at odds with many of the people who populate the world of outdoors sports in a powder keg of varieties, but I've found I can often prop open some kind of door between us by almost unintentionally deploying this shibboleth. Sentences become short. Observational. Or they start with a long "Welllllll...." or "Ya know..." The ends of gerunds float away down the crick. It's a version of what linguists call code-switching.

Most people code-switch on a daily basis: if you've ever used a "customer service voice" at work, you know what it's like to slightly alter your persona and lexicon in order to fulfill the role that works best for the situation at hand. Just by altering vocabulary and playing up the long Midwestern "O," I found I could signal my own membership in hunting and fishing circles, and maybe even purchase an additional degree of legitimacy. Not to mention tour some fascinating verbal local color.

As Fellegy put it, "Grammarians and students of syntax may cringe at some of their unstructured ramblings. But these affronts to linguistic propriety must be accepted

here. Why quibble about the simple and natural usage that fishing people know so well? To say that fish were 'taken with consistency' or that 'the harvest was bountiful' hardly measures up to 'We clobbered 'em!' or 'They really nailed 'em!'"

Of course, such terms are a double-edged sword when it comes to talking to people outside the hunting and fishing community. Some people might cringe to hear you described the deliberate taking of animal life as "bagging a buck" or "mowing 'em down." In fact, the Minnesota firearm safety guidebook warns new hunters against using particularly violent language that might make non-hunters uncomfortable. As lively and robust as the language of hunters is, hunters must also guard their turns of phrase in order to protect the public reputation of their chosen sport. As in all human communication, misinterpretation is common. Awareness of language choices can serve a hunter as well as any of his other hunting tools.

Although Joe Fellego's book was totally mystifying when I first picked it up, as I read, I found myself suddenly armed with the right questions to ask. I pushed my dad to go fishing with me some nights after he got home from work; we hadn't done that together since I was little.

In 2012, while I was home from college for the summer, we took a family vacation to Cedar Bay Resort in northern Minnesota. Widow Lake was deep and clear as an emerald. Across the shore, a float plane was secured to the end of a dock. It was easy

for me to pretend I'd ended up on some remote lake in the Alaska wilderness, like Brian Robeson in *Hatchet*.

We were the only family renting a cabin at the resort that week, and had full use of a canoe and paddleboat. I'd fallen in love with canoes from many years of summer camp, and every morning I took a solo paddle with the bow riding high and empty. I went slow, staring down hard into the clear depths in hopes of spying a giant muskellunge, a mean-looking monster of a fish, which I'd never seen except for mounted on the walls of small-town bars. I learned from Fellegy's book this was the same thing as what my dad called a "muskie."

In the evenings, Dad joined me in the canoe and we fished together, hauling in a small catch of the same old panfish we always caught. But this time, we brought our catch to the bench in the fish-cleaning shed. I watched Dad's expert knife from over his shoulder, marveling at the practiced, unfussy way he sliced into the fish. He'd perfected this skill decades ago, working at Fellegy's resort.

Inside the cabin, Mom helped us prepare a shore lunch. The fillets were embarrassingly small. Between the splay of tiny bones and crispy skins, I felt like I was choking down the end of a rake.

"Not great," my mom said.

But my instinct was defensive. It wasn't the best fish I'd ever eaten, definitely. But it was the fish I'd put the most work into, and that *had* to make up for taste. To this day, the smell of hot oil still holds the phantom odor of frying fish, no matter what I'm cooking.

Hunting and fishing stories are mainly stories about men. I held tightly onto the female presence in hunting and outdoor stories, because it was so rare. Sometimes, in the older classic stories that my grandfather seemed to enjoy, there was a brief mention of a seldom-seen wife, who never participated in the adventure but seemed to exist fondly in the periphery. I both sympathized with and loathed this occurrence.

I took special delight in the archetypal stories about Artemis, the Greek goddess of hunting. Although Ancient Greece had its share of damsels in distress, it also seemed to be populated with self-actualized women: the fleet-footed Atalanta, vengeful Hera, shape-shifting Daphne.

In the stories my dad enjoyed, I had to be contented to women only in marginal roles, like that of Mattie Ross, the precocious teenage girl in *True Grit* who hires John Wayne (or Jeff Bridges, depending on which version you watch) to track down and kill the man who killed her parents. I admired Mattie's tenacity as a young woman alone in a tough world, but what part of *True Grit* do audiences remember: anything Mattie Ross does, or John Wayne barreling on horseback toward the enemy, bellowing "Fill your hand, you son of a bitch!"?

In *Jeremiah Johnson*, it was Swan, the daughter of an Indian chief given to Johnson as a gift in exchange for his heroism. Swan doesn't speak English and her interactions with Johnson are fearful at first, but as they spend time together, they grow to care for each other, and learn from each other. In one scene, Swan stops Johnson from shooting at a grouse and instead kills the bird with a precisely-aimed rock. It was an unusual pleasure to see Johnson attentively learn something from this Native woman who

doesn't even have a single speaking line. However, Swan's death at the hands of a Crow raiding party becomes Johnson's motivation to slay scores of Crow warriors through the latter half of the film. This story falls into the "fridged woman" television trope. The term refers to a character (usually a woman) who is killed off in a gruesome way and left to be found (i.e. stuffed into a fridge) in order to cause insult or anguish to another character. Often, the entire purpose of a female character's existence, and death, is to forward the journey of a male character out of vengeance.

Hunting narratives by and for women have existed for a long time, and they've increased as more women become hunters, but they're not the primary stories I grew up with. I adored musicals, but somehow never came across *Annie Get Your Gun*. I was too old for the archery prowess of Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* to make an impression on me. Google "great hunting stories" or "great hunting books" and you'll be hard pressed to find a list that includes a woman author.

As representation continues to grow for women in hunting and outdoor sports, I wonder if the changing landscape will produce more revered classics that feature women more prominently, ones that put women in the front and center in a space where girls like myself wondered if women could be not only present, but seen as important, or cool, like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. I wonder if there's a story out there waiting to happen, with a woman at the front, that hunters will ever quote as reverently as my dad quotes *Jeremiah Johnson*.

When I went to Wisconsin for Thanksgiving this year, my dad and I spent a night at the cabin and watched *Jeremiah Johnson* together, snacking on leftover turkey and cold green bean casserole off paper plates. No matter how many times we've seen it, we can't help laughing at the scene where Johnson first meets Del Gue, a fellow trapper, buried up to his head in sand. With his bald head and handlebar mustache, Del Gue looks almost exactly like Dad's buddy Richard Kane, the storyteller.

Our viewings of the film are well rehearsed by now, but I never have to force a laugh when Dad says "Hey, it's Richard!"

Returning to the cabin for each hunting season is a lot like returning to a favorite book: the same characters will be there, the same mission at hand, the same mini-Snickers bars tucked into my blaze-orange vest. The same walk across crisp, frosted leaves, the same catch in my lungs from November air before the sun rises. Like a book, hunting is most real in the details, the tiny things you remember that give each outing character and meaning. When my dad and I walk into pre-dawn woods with our rifles slung over our shoulders, I can't help but picture what characters we cut in our boots and camo, how like the beginning of a story this is.

Chapter 3: Hunting, Race, and Culture



My dad is often too preoccupied with projects around the cabin to lounge around, but sometimes he'll sit by the outdoor fire pit with me for a moment. Pine logs burn clean, fragrant fires, but most of the wood we have on hand is from dirt-caked poplar deadfalls, which stink and belch black smoke. I'll often make a job of it, reading beside the fire, shifting with the wind, while feeding in the next hunk of hastily-chopped poplar wood.

"Only a white man would make a fire with so much smoke," he'll say, something I'm sure he heard in a movie.

He and I both grew up consuming narratives that included American Indians, but rarely were these stories told by actual American Indian voices. Stereotypes abound, perhaps nowhere more egregiously than in the westerns my dad enjoys so much.

The impulse to "play Indian" is noted by so many outdoor writers, but rarely interrogated in full. Steven Rinella even noted in *Meat Eater* his theory that boys who chose to play Indians in childhood games were more likely to have a stronger connection to the natural world as adults than those who chose to play cowboys. The picture of Davy Crockett in his fringed buckskin, coonskin cap, and moccasins—a style of dress adopted from American Indian tribes—is vivid in the American imagination; especially for children looking for adventure. It is extraordinary the parts of Native American identity hunters have been allowed to pick and choose, while ultimately casting away the actual lived experience of American Indians, and even denigrating current indigenous hunting and fishing practices.

Like many who enjoy the outdoors, I grew up fascinated by the portrayals of American Indians living close to nature, cultivating what appeared to me as semi-magical relationships with wild animals and even plants, such as the corn that appears in form of a young man in Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*. I literally watched that corn come to life as a man in gold and green tassels in an annual *Song of Hiawatha* pageant in Pipestone, Minnesota: a place of peace to the Dakota. This southern prairie region of Minnesota emphasizes its indigenous history in many of its historic landmarks, but when I watched the pageant as a child, there was nothing to signal to me that Hiawatha's tale

was not a real Indian legend, but a tale written by a partially-informed white man who retold the story in the way he thought was the most narratively exciting. My favorite books included titles such as *Indian Captive*, *Jane Gibbs: Little Bird Who Was Caught*, and *Julie of the Wolves*, all which featured American Indians, all of them written by white women.

As an adult, I've had chances to learn and "decolonize" my bookshelf, as one article put it, by adding indigenous voices, but the communities and state governments of my home places are struggling to do something similar, and ultimately, something that makes much more of a difference.

As I write this, the headlines include news that after a years-long legal battle, the courts have decided that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is allowed to rename Minneapolis' Lake Calhoun its original Dakota name, Bde Maka Ska. The action was opposed bitterly by those who claimed such a renaming was an erasure of history. The extreme resistance to recognition of American Indian history has always baffled me. It's a conversation that's difficult to have with some of the people around my hunting camp, whose opinions are strong and long-held.

When I hunt, I remind myself the history of the land I hunt on as often as I can. Hunting experiences are deeply tied to the land on which they unfold. These spaces become precious to hunters. Public lands are an American legacy that are highly valued by its citizens, but I don't often hear hunters express thoughts about the thousands of years of human history and land use that passed before they became the hunters on that land.

The land I hunt in northwest Wisconsin is the traditional territory of Anishinabe (Ojibwe) and Oceti Šakotowin (Dakota) tribes. Our hunting land has been radically shaped by agriculture in the last two centuries, but it is still rich in habitat that supports many species of game animals. Grouse, turkeys, and white-tailed deer roam the wooded ravines, the hills are thick with wild blackberries, and the lower, damp areas abound with wild ramp in the spring. I like to imagine how the bounty of these woods must have contributed to the livelihood of First Nations tribes. I've often set out on a Sunday morning with a small bucket and the family dog, roaming up and down the trails and harvesting hundreds of fat blackberries and raspberries that stain my fingers purple. As I glance up the trail, shaded by green poplar leaves, it frequently occurs to me that someone may have done exactly this a thousand years ago, in exactly this spot, with their own canine companion of the day. As the centuries evaporate through this shared experience—a factor many hunters value as something that connects them to an earlier form of humanity—I am disturbed that we don't do a better job of recognizing the history of this land, and of the hunters who continue this lifestyle today.

History tends to relegate the Native experience not only to the past, but to always frame it as a tragedy. David Treuer is one academic trying to rewrite this depiction of the American Indian.

Subsistence was a part of Treuer's childhood on the Leech Lake Reservation, where more than half of all households live below the poverty line.

The idea of an "Indian" lifestyle is one often conflated with hunting and fishing, activities perceived as "close to the land."

"Hidden in this reorientation is the idea—sometimes explicit and sometimes merely notional—that perhaps American Indians had it right all along. The Indian way of life, and activities such as hunting and gathering that are coded Indian, are healthier and more sustainable. What I hear in these narratives is the persistent notion that American Indians and our associated lifestyles are not just more authentic or noble but more practical," Treuer wrote for a 2014 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.

But the picture of harmonic sustainability isn't exactly the reality on the Leech Lake reservation. Subsistence hunting, fishing, and foraging is extremely laborious, and becoming more difficult with increasing urbanization and the effects of climate change. It's far from the idyllic portrait of harmony with the land that those outside indigenous cultures might envision.

The Leech Lake Indian Reservation, Treuer's home, lies about 8 miles due north of Deep Portage. The same trails where we led strings of summer campers between Bass Pond and Big Deep Lake may have been used for centuries by Ojibwe groups accessing plenteous fishing waters, the cranberry bog, or the wild rice beds. Though we emphasized many aspects of early humanity and subsistence lifestyles to the campers, we rarely talked about indigenous presence. In fact, if conversation began to steer there, I usually tried to push it in another direction, because campers often came to us spouting the opinions of older family members, often reflecting tensions over treaty rights. These 11- and 12-year-olds barely had the patience to sit still between rounds on the gun range; never mind discuss the finer points of stereotypes and Native sovereignty. I would have liked to highlight the presence of indigenous communities more, especially since our camp occupied historically Native land, but it wasn't written into our curriculum at all,

except for where we played games that emulated the hunting methods of early humans, such as throwing atlatls at a foam turkey in a sunny meadow. At the same time, it was a bit of a relief to avoid the common cultural appropriations summer camps in the woods have been committing forever. (For example: as a child, I sometimes attended summer programs at Camp Lakamaga, a nonsense word no doubt meant to evoke the rustic lifestyle of American Indians.)

The friction between sportsmen and women and indigenous communities has always seemed lamentable to me. But as in any sector of society, friction is common when it comes to matters of race. I've heard fishermen, like the parents of some of my campers, complain unabashedly about Indians depleting the game supply without limit and without restraint, leaving less for the hunters who paid for their licenses fair and square. The issue is particularly pronounced at my dad's childhood haunt, Mille Lacs Lake. The lake is renowned for its fishing, but since it's next door to the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Reservation, the lake is frequently visited by tribal fishermen, who are not subject to the same possession restrictions as non-tribal sportsmen and women.

Certain tribal groups in Minnesota and Wisconsin signed treaties with the U.S. government, ceding land in exchange for the retention of fishing and hunting rights on the ceded land. The details of these treaties were largely ignored by law enforcement for years. Law enforcement officials slapped American Indian hunters and fishermen with fines for poaching and trespassing, despite the dictates of the historic documents that explicitly allowed them to fish and hunt in these places. It wasn't until the 1980s that tribal groups began to have success in lobbying for recognition of their historic treaty rights.

In a 1997 article, still in relatively recent wake of the court decisions, Minnesota Public Radio talked to Ojibwe language teacher Nick Hawkins about treaty rights. "Remember that we have ancestors that paid with their lives, for what we have today," Hawkins said. "Somehow they had the wisdom to retain these treaty rights. So the best thing that we can do is remember our ancestors when we're out on the lakes when we're fishing."

The walleye in Mille Lacs, however, have been subjected to steep population declines that scientists have not fully managed to explain. For several seasons, walleye fishing has been entirely closed on Mille Lacs, sparking outrage among those who blame Natives for overfishing and squandering their resources, ruining it for everyone.

Compared to everything that had been taken from them, I didn't think it seemed like so much to give up some walleye. After all, there are other lakes, with other walleye. But no one enjoys having a tradition taken away: many non-indigenous people, such as my dad, grew up harvesting stringers of walleye from the lake, and I understand that there's some resentment at the idea of being told they can no longer do this. The irony, I suppose, in them not seeing this is exactly the way the Ojibwe must have felt when their treaty rights were infringed.

As of May 2020, non-tribal anglers are allowed to keep one walleye from the lake per season. To fishermen like my dad, this number seems extremely unjust compared to the days of their youth, when they could come home at the end of the day with a walleye banquet.

On the other side of the coin, Native cultural traditions have butted up against other communities; ones that might normally include allies. Many people who care

deeply for the earth espouse a philosophy of veganism. The remonstrations of vegans toward indigenous hunters and fishermen and women, for example, are intensified when their arguments attack not only a personal choice of diet, but a personal choice that is deeply tied to traditional roots and cultural identity. In her takedown of vegans who criticize Native hunting traditions, Rylee McCallin of the Lakota People's Law Project writes: "Asking Indigenous communities to give up their values and traditions of hunting to make up for the mistakes of colonial settlers and industrial capitalism is like asking Native people to apologize for the occupation of land that was rightfully theirs in the first place."

A few years ago, I spent a hot June morning in Afton, Minnesota, at the Belwin Conservancy, waiting for a herd of bison to hurtle out of a trailer and onto the tall grass of the prairie. The staff of Belwin (a member of The Nature Conservancy) maintained this native prairie habitat by hosting a small herd of bison every summer. The bison helped to maintain the ecosystem by cutting into the earth with their hooves, and creating wallows that spread seeds. These particular bison were from a farm in Wisconsin, eventually destined to become someone's bison burger. In the meantime, they were serving as a natural tonic for the health of the prairie habitat.

Families gathered on a viewing platform towering over the prairie, and others pressed up against the fence, squinting in the sunlight. Everyone craned forward as a brave man unlatched the back of the trailer, and a mountain range of shaggy brown beasts

erupted outward, pounding sprays of dust up from the ground as they disappeared toward the far edge of the prairie.

The excitement was over in just a few minutes, and people began to disperse back toward the row of educational tents and food trucks set up on the grass. Among them, I was pleased to spy the medicine wheel logo of the Tatanka Truck.

I'd heard about the Tatanka Truck, but this was the first time I'd seen it in the wild. This food truck was a project of professional chef Sean Sherman, otherwise known as The Sioux Chef. A member of the Oglala Sioux from the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, Sherman has gained a lot of attention in recent years for his efforts to revitalize native cuisine.

Some of the menu items were unfamiliar, but I opted for a cedar-maple iced tea and a bison taco. Was it weird to eat bison when we were all here to celebrate the living bison on the Belwin prairie? I supposed not. Why not celebrate all aspects of the bison life cycle?

The taco was nothing like the frybread tacos served at powwows, and also nothing like the kind of taco you could get from an authentic Mexican restaurant. It looked more like a tossed salad at first glance: bits of bison meat scattered in a bed of greens and seeds on top of a fried disk of polenta, drizzled with a tart wojape sauce.

Sherman's recipes are modern, sometimes gourmet takes on indigenous ingredients, rather than actual historic foods, but they emphasize wild foods that would have been available in the Americas before European contact. These include venison, duck, rabbit, quail eggs, cultivated vegetables, and foraged greens and mushrooms.

I marveled at the effectiveness of this small, delectable dish to raise my consciousness of modern Native life. What a shame, that after living my whole life on this continent, eating foods cultivated by Native people for generations such as corn and squash and beans, this was my first taste of actual, pre-contact Native cuisine.

Food is such a strong element of culture—the power of the bison taco to put me in conversation with the current Native culture of this land in such a sensory way is so much greater than abstract imaginings of what life must have been like so many centuries ago on the land where I live and hunt. I could not only hold the bison taco in its little cardboard tray in my hands: I could hold its flavor in my memory: the soft, slightly crisped mush of the polenta, the sweet-sour bite of the wojape.

The Tatanka Truck has since shut down, but Sherman and community partners are working on opening a restaurant and food lab in Minneapolis. Similar businesses that emphasize Native cuisine are becoming popular across the U.S., reacquainting Americans with the native flavors of their continent, and engendering an appreciation of the cultures that existed here long before the arrival of pizza and cheeseburgers.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service statistics do not illuminate how many hunters are from First Nations communities, or what percentage of those communities are hunters. Non-white hunters make up only 3 percent of hunters, but this tiny fraction includes hunters from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. There are specific support organizations that encourage the participation of these minority populations, such as

Latino Outdoors and Native Outdoors. If R3 initiatives have the desired effect, more and more people from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds will begin to participate in hunting sports, which means that the faces in the woods may show a little more variability in the coming decades.

During my first few weeks of counselor training at Deep Portage, before our summer camp really kicked into gear, everyone knew where to find Joey at the end of the day. I recall taking a bend in the trail to find him barefoot on the wooden dock on Bass Pond, casting into the water lilies with the practiced ease of a lifelong fisherman. Outside of work hours, he was rarely seen without a fishing pole in his hand.

At 19 years old, nearly 10 years my junior, Joey Xiong was one of the youngest Deep Portage counselors, but also one of the most experienced. A lifelong fisherman and hunter, he exuded a cool assuredness about every task we set about with our campers, especially time spent fishing on Bass Pond and Big Deep Lake. I often had to wheedle children to get them to keep them in line, but Joey's effortless coolness made him an instant favorite, especially with the boys who wanted nothing more than to spend every waking moment with a line in the water.

In addition to our firearm safety camps, we held a couple themed camps during the summer. Joey and I were team leaders for Fishing Camp. I was happy to snap kids life jackets into place and help them steer their canoes, but Joey had the answers to all their most important questions.

Joey's personality was instantly a favorite among the counselors as well. He knew how to enjoy the most out of everything. When we took the kids to the pond, he brought

two poles for himself. If there was any daylight left by the time we were done with work, you could bet he was down on the dock again.

The counselors gave each other joking nicknames over the course of the summer. Joey had several, but the one that eventually stuck was Dragon. The name originated from our Friday evening tradition: after the campers had left for the week, we bundled into our cars with our dirty laundry and drove to the laundromat in nearby Hackensack. While we waited for our clothes to wash, we walked across the street for dinner at Udom's Thai Restaurant, the finest establishment in the one-street town. Udom's offered a spectrum of spiciness on their menu, from one to three. Having grown up on spicy Hmong cuisine, Joey decided that level three wasn't going to cut it for him. He asked for level seven.

His eyes watered after the first few sips of his noodle bowl, but he grinned and eventually slurped the whole thing down. Afterward, we joked that he must have been breathing fire.

Joey was born in St. Paul and attended the Hmong academy almost directly across the street from my university. His parents were immigrants from Laos, who came to the Twin Cities in the wake of the Vietnam War.

Around 5,000 years ago, the Hmong culture originated in China, but over the centuries, many of them migrated to Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand. In the 1960s, the communities living in the remote mountains of Laos were recruited by the American CIA to help fight the North Vietnamese. When the pro-American Vietnamese government collapsed in 1975, hundreds of Hmong fled persecution by the new communist government by immigrating to the U.S.

Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California have the largest populations of Hmong in the U.S. "The concentration of Hmong in these states is due largely to a significant secondary migration within the United States, as Hmong families sought to re-form their kinship-based society," wrote the authors of a 2008 study on Hmong use of outdoor resources.

As the study observed, connection to the natural world is a significant part of Hmong culture, though widely under-researched. On American soil, many Hmong have continued the hunting, fishing, and foraging practices they carried out while living in Laos. A 1993 study found that 60 percent of Hmong households in Green Bay, Wisconsin participated in hunting and fishing—more than twice the participation rate of Green Bay's general population.

"No wonder why men like to go hunting, because they say when they are outdoors they forget about everything. When you get there, it is like they say. You don't remember about the stress at home," said a woman in one of the 2008 study's focus groups.

I asked Joey why he thought hunting and fishing were such an important part of the Hmong-American lifestyle.

"I think it's very important, because it brings everyone together," he said. "Even if you don't know them and they're sitting across from us in our camp, we invite them over." Joey started hunting with his dad and uncles, and made more connections with relatives over the years. Even his mom began hunting in the past few years.

Joey is a prime example of a Hmong hunter and fisherman, and one who is poised to educate the next generation of outdoorsmen and women. His experiences hunting and

fishing have been mostly positive, but the Hmong community of outdoorspeople has not always been welcomed in the U.S.

Hmong conceptions of private property, for example, are a little different than the definitions under U.S. law. "In Laos, a big part of the traditional role for men was to provide meat," Paul Hillmer of the Hmong Oral History Project told the *New York Times*. "The adjustment for Hmong men in this country was getting used to things like private-property boundaries, hunting licenses, and regulations."

The *Times* article profiled a Sacramento radio host named Yia Yang, whose programming was designed to answer common questions about hunting, fishing, and sportsmanship specifically for the Hmong community. Yang was California's first Hmong-language firearm safety instructor, the first of several filling the high demand for Hmong-language instruction.

Yang's program became a center of community discourse when news of a brutal shooting reached a national stage. In 2004, a Hmong hunter named Chai Soua Vang shot eight people and killed six while hunting in Wisconsin. Vang was on private land when he was approached by a group of white hunters, who confronted him with racial insults. That's when Vang opened fire.

While in jail awaiting trial, Vang sent a letter to a reporter at the Chicago Tribune explaining his perspective of the incident. "I have done something to defend myself and my race," he wrote.

The incident has shadowed conversations about Hmong hunters for years afterward. In the aftermath, Yang devoted a few of his radio programs exclusively to this

topic. "After that, a lot of people and a lot of elders quit hunting because they were afraid," he said.

A year before the shooting, Minneapolis filmmaker Va-Megn Thoj created a 2003 film called *Die By Night*, a horror film which featured a group of Hmong who go camping and are terrorized by what they think is a demon from their cultural mythology. At the end of the film, it turns out that it's actually a party of white hunters that have been picking off and eviscerating the campers one by one. Anthropologist Louisa Schein interviewed Thoj for a 2007 paper in *American Quarterly*, drawing parallels between the racial tensions documented in Thoj's film and the real-life circumstances of the Chai Soua Vang incident.

Thoj told Schein that he had personally heard stories about unpleasant and sometimes violent run-ins between white and Hmong hunting parties when they met each other in the woods. Thoj recalled an encounter in his own life where his hunting party ran into a group of white hunters, who were not outright hostile, but seemed unfriendly in response to greetings. A short time later, a parks official showed up to check out the group of Hmong hunters.

"We were in the public park and all of a sudden the park ranger came up and told us that we were under observation," Thoj said. "I think what the white hunters did was probably report, 'There's a bunch of Asians here and they're breaking the law or trespassing,' whatever."

Thoj wrote an op-ed for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* explaining why he would never go deer hunting again after such an encounter. "White hunters have a set of stereotypes for Hmong hunters: don't know the law, don't understand private property

rights, can't speak English, and can't be understood. In short, they see Hmong hunters as ignorant and not to be trusted. Yet, Hmong are allowed guns to go around and hunt just like they are. This represents an unacceptable threat and just galls some white hunters and landowners to no end."

Contrary to the stereotype, Thoj said that even recently immigrated Hmong people would understand the idea of American property rights, even though Hmong attitudes toward property are a little different. "I think the traditional Hmong concept of property is that you don't really own land unless you build a house on it or you use it for farming. Land is not something you can own. You can use it. When you're not using it, someone else can use it. Even if you're using it, someone else can walk across it. There's no sense of trespassing."

Media coverage, however, was largely responsible for perpetuating misconceptions about Hmong outdoorsmen. In 2007, another incident shook the community when a white man shot and killed a Hmong squirrel hunter in Wisconsin. The perpetrator in that case was also squirrel hunting, and made disparaging remarks about Hmong people to authorities investigating the case.

Both of these fatal incidents heightened racial tensions; one member of the 2008 focus groups even observed how it seemed like white hunters showed more wariness and respect around Hmong groups in outdoor spaces.

I knew that Hmong outdoorsmen were common in Minnesota and Wisconsin, but I'd never heard these stories of racial violence. The 2004 shooting took place only an hour's drive away from my own hunting cabin. These are the most extreme examples of racial tensions among hunters, but the 2008 Hmong focus group expressed a variety of

instances of harassment and discrimination, both on the part of other outdoorspeople and of parks staff and officials. Among the suggestions of this group for better recognition of Hmong outdoorspeople was the recommendation that park agencies hire more Hmong staff members.

When he came to Deep Portage, Joey told everyone that his dream for the future was to become a DNR officer, so he could spend his time outdoors, in the spaces he loved best, with people who shared his passion. When I asked him a few months ago if that's still what he wanted to do, he told me his passion had shifted a little.

"The kids stuck with me," he said. "Technology is so good right now that kids are not involved in outdoors or involved in hunting. I think I want to go past that technology stage and have more kids be involved in outdoors having fun instead of playing on iPads or computers." Though Joey has decided against a career with the DNR for the moment, I have no doubt he will continue to be an excellent outdoor educator and role model for kids of all backgrounds.

In the age of Black Lives Matter activism, we're used to the heartbreaking headlines. We've heard the stories of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and recently, Ahmaud Arbery—all of whom were shot to death while unarmed. A particularly disturbing case for non-white hunters is that of Philando Castile, who was shot in his car just a couple miles away from my university and Joey's high school. Castile was legally

carrying a firearm, and it was the presence of a firearm in the situation that was emphasized heavily by the media, since by all accounts, Castile did everything right by alerting the police officer to the weapon.

As ecologist and hunter Jonathan Hall has pointed out, carrying a firearm while black in order to enjoy hunting activities is loaded with so much more danger than it is for any of the 97 percent of white hunters in the woods. Hall expressed his anger and frustration with the primarily white landowners and hunters that rarely acknowledge the history of the land that now belongs to them. Yet Hall hunts only on private property. "I don't hunt public land because white men with firearms and a reason to discharge said firearms make me incredibly nervous," he wrote in a 2019 article for *Rewire*. "Can we have a conversation about what justice looks like in the aftermath of genocide and anti-Black violence? The answer from the hunting community has been a deafening 'no,'" Hall wrote.

Taylor Morten is an ambassador for the women's outdoor sports group Artemis, and wrote an account of her experience as a black, woman, queer hunter in South Carolina in article on *Autostraddle*. She recalled attending a youth hunt where the other hunters were all white boys and their fathers.

"Although we laughed and chatted with the other hunters, we were also othered in the space," she wrote. "I've met white men sporting confederate flags on their hats as we headed to our hunting site. Some of them stop to talk, while others give us a nod and continue in their own direction. General caution is something we carry with us in the woods."

It's more than the threat of violence, as Hall observes. It's also a matter of erasure, of narratives that have been overpowered by the dominant white male perspective. A recent episode of the podcast *The Hunting Collective*, hosted by Ben O'Brien, had Dr. Carolyn Finney as a guest. Finney is the author of the book *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Outdoors*. When she was young, her parents worked as caretakers on a wooded property owned by a wealthy Jewish family outside New York City. Finney grew up enjoying the wild, wooded spaces, and her parents enjoyed looking after the property. When the landowners sold the property, Finney's parents moved to a new home in Virginia, but Finney saw how badly her father missed the land he had taken care of for so many years. Shortly thereafter, her parents received a letter from a conservation organization notifying the public that the land they had previously managed was now a conservation easement.

"At the end of the letter, it thanks the new owner for his conservation-mindedness. The new owner had been on there maybe three years. There was nothing in the letter acknowledging my parents who had cared for that land for 50 years. And just that fast, they got erased," she said.

People of color have always had intimate relationships with the land, but history doesn't often reflect these stories.

"We just don't see them, and then it kind of rolls into this myth, such as black people don't do these sort of things," Finney explained. "They don't hike, they don't camp, whatever it is. Actually, none of that is true. It actually comes back to, this is not what we're taught in school, these aren't the stories we see on television, these aren't the

stories we read in the books. There is this full, rich relationship there, but it butts up against a history that hasn't invited it in."

Finney pointed out that revered conservationists such as John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt expressed extremely racist views toward non-white people—a piece of history that is often overlooked in favor of their contributions to the world of natural resources.

"If we are going to embrace that we want to love and uphold John Muir and Roosevelt, we can't pick and choose what parts of their personality we want to use for that. That's disingenuous," Finney said. "They were smart, powerful men who had some really good ideas. And guess what, they also had some racist ideas, that in part came from their own privilege. That they could actually hold those perspectives at the same time. That they could talk about nature and wilderness in the way that they did with such love and respect. They had such love and respect for nature. But they did not have that for all their fellow human beings. That's just what it is. If you're one of those human beings, you're looking at going, okay, well where am I in that equation? What does that mean for me?"

Rampant racism has resulted in "cancel culture," where offenders are blocked and ostracized on social media platforms. But Finney argued that this is not an effective way to change the way race is perceived and discussed. "Whatever they've done, they should be held accountable. But it's not about leaving them out in the cold, because if we start doing that, pretty much everybody's going to be out in the cold," she said.

The important work is in engaging people, especially people in the white hunting community, in conversations about race and privilege. One way to create a setting for this discourse is for white hunters to encourage diversity in their own hunting groups, and not

just to invite one person from a different background, but maybe a few of them, to lessen pressure on them. She suggests organizing trips together, and opening up more of a community dialogue. "What would it look like to have a meal where people are invited to come share with what you have, to open that up as an opportunity? The intention doesn't have to be to get more people hunting. The intention can be bigger than that, to be how we can be in support of each other and be part of this community. It may mean that you will get some new hunters with you, and you might not get some other people hunting. But that doesn't mean they won't be happy to come and help you cook up the food or just be part of your community in a fuller way."

Theoretically, hunters ought to understand better than most the pressure of acting as a representative of a minority group, where the actions of an individual can do damage to a group as a whole. Public perception of hunting as a sport is soured by the actions of poachers and hunters who behave poorly. Yet hunting is a choice: ethnicity and income level are not.

Hunting and fishing could never mean quite the same thing for me as it does to an Ojibwe angler, or to a black hunter worried about meeting a law enforcement officer, but these are experiences and perspectives that deserve attention from the wider hunting audience; especially those with preconceived notions about the hunting practices of other cultures.

The Hunting Collective host Ben O'Brien expressed his frustration as a white hunter, and asked what he could do to help support people who are racial minorities in the hunting world. Finney referred O'Brien to an article in *The Atlantic*: "Five Ways to Make the Outdoors More Inclusive." The article includes an action plan, designed by a group of prominent outdoors experts and advocates, on how to increase participation of minority groups in outdoor sports.

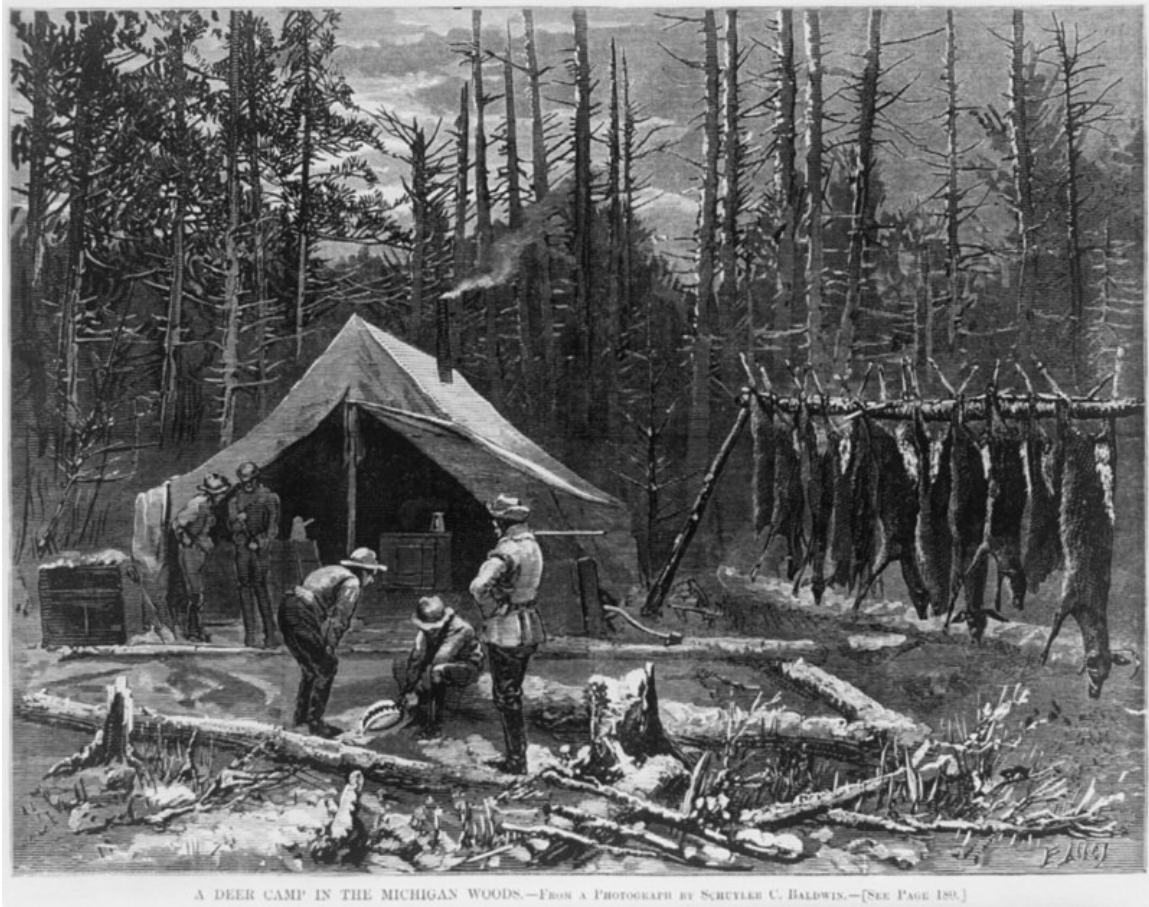
At the individual level, this might include joining new groups and making new connections, inviting new hunters to join you on your hunt or at least to dinner, expressing your concerns to local, state, and federal officials, and engaging in discussion on the topic.

Sports that put weapons in people's hands will never be entirely safe, but it is difficult to hold my head up as a hunter knowing the racial prejudice and violence that unfolds in the spaces that represent a refuge and place of restoration to so many hunters. The problem exceeds hunting, of course: systemic racism is a problem everywhere in the nation, and will not change overnight.

I have hope that the future of hunting will look a little different than it does today. There is currently a lot of compassion, a lot of goodwill, between groups of hunters, but as many of the above accounts testify, there is also a lot of misunderstanding, fear, and hatred. If change happens, it will probably be painfully slow—in more than 200 years, the U.S. has done woefully little to overcome its systemic racism, never mind the outright racism proudly espoused by certain segments of the populace, including members of the hunting community.

I recognize that my interactions with the land and with hunting have been privileged by race and socioeconomic status, and that my knowledge of the history of the land I know is incomplete. However, as I continue to explore the world of hunting sports, I hope to make new connections with people from communities different from my own, and expand my own understanding and appreciation of the sport through a multitude of perspectives.

Chapter 4: Hunting, Kinship, Community, and Spirituality



Even before I knew whether I'd like to hunt or not, I knew I loved being at hunting camp. There was something about the creation of a different space, a different social order, different norms, that was extremely alluring. It was like I was allowed to move into a different life for a few days: one where I stayed in the woods all the time and cooked pancake breakfasts and read books in my bunk.

My family purchased their hunting land in 2009. The death of my great-grandmother Martha left my dad with just enough inheritance to finally fulfill his dream. Prior to that, he hunted on the properties of friends and family, invoking the rifle season

hospitality that many landowners extend each year to their friends and family. After 2009, we became the hosts.

The property was about 64 wooded acres in rural Wisconsin. The nearest town was unincorporated; the nearest grocery store was a half-hour drive. The land was previously owned by a farmer, and the property was rife with old rusted lines of barbed wire that penned in the cows he grazed there.

For a long time we just called it "The Property," but my mom came up with the idea to give it a more appealing name. The land's most exciting feature was an artesian spring well that gushes from the ground in a steep ravine, which winds throughout the woodland as a seasonal creek. Given the abundance of poplar trees in the swampy areas of the woodland, "Poplar Springs" is the name that stuck. Soon it was just "Poplar," for short. I'm not sure if anyone outside my family calls it that; I think it's probably just "Steve's place" to most everyone else.

In the fall months of 2009, a cabin was constructed on the site, but it wasn't exactly home sweet home for me. It had none of the charm of the lakeside log cabins my friends had grown up with. It had bare cement floors, and was furnished entirely with secondhand furniture, and things from our own home that had grown too worn and shabby to offer any aesthetic appeal.

Poplar became my dad's domain quickly. He'd leave from work on Friday to spend the weekend there, working on small projects on the house, and on tilling and planting food plots to draw in deer. At the front edge of the property, he built a garage to work on the classic cars that were his hobby outside of deer season. Visitors dropped by frequently, men I'd never seen before but who knew my dad somehow. They brought him

their car problems, helped out with construction projects, and practiced target-shooting with him in the safety of an upper meadow.

But our first season hunting there, it was just my dad and I. Steven hadn't taken his hunter safety course yet, so it was just the two of us. We didn't even have light bulbs installed in the building yet: our main source of light was a construction worker's flood lamp.

I hated almost everything about that hunting season. I hated getting up at 4 a.m., and sitting for hours in the cold. As far as I was concerned, there wasn't even a point or motivation to it, because even if I saw a deer, I still couldn't imagine myself shooting it. I was a high school junior, and had more pressing interests than killing deer. But escaping the suburbs for a few weekends to hang out in the woods was appealing, and I knew how badly my dad wanted me to participate. He paid for my license, and loaned me his best rifle, a 25-06. As much as I resented the actual reason for us being there, I actually came to enjoy the practice of it, and appreciated being included in something that had meant so much to my dad for so many years.

I hunted two seasons without seeing a deer, and then moved off to college. During my absence the hunting camp changed: more and more friends and relatives showed up each year to hunt our woods. My brother hunted for a few seasons, and killed his first deer. Although I didn't hunt, I still spent a few days during hunting season hanging out at the cabin, and was somewhat overwhelmed by the retinue of relatives and friends of my dad who had become the new players of the hunting camp drama from season to season. People I barely ever saw suddenly slept in the same bunkroom as me; I learned who snored through the night and who woke up ungodly early. The camp necessitated a sort of

household intimacy with strangers: something I found both challenging and somehow pleasant.

When I finally returned to the hunt in 2016, it was amid this group of people—uncles, cousins, cousins by marriage, and friends of my dad—I would need to feel out the shape of my own place as a hunter among their ranks.

My cousin Stacy married her fiancé Hunter beside a creek, two or three miles from our hunting land in Wisconsin. Their hound dog Benelli was among the members of the wedding party who trodded down the grass aisle. One of their wedding colors was camo. At the conclusion of the ceremony, someone released a pair of ring-necked pheasants—a long-tailed rooster and a golden hen—into the skies. Not especially strong fliers, they glided down into a meadow across the creek. We could hear the rooster emitting his harsh "kraaak!" call somewhere off in the distance all through the evening barn dance.

Stacy and Hunter were two of the most regular characters at our yearly deer camp, helping cook meals and do some chores in appreciation of my dad's role as host. Hunter is the son of a butcher, and knows exactly which cuts of meat are best to bring inside straight from the deer carcasses to sear on the stove.

For Stacey and Hunter, hunting is an identity, part of their character. A little while ago, I asked Stacey what made hunting such an important part of her life.

"What really got me into it was wanting to connect with my dad," she said. Her two older siblings had tried hunting but given it up; hunting was her chance to share something unique with her father. Like me, her experience hunting began with joining her dad on those Thanksgiving pheasant hunts when we were kids. From there, she became a skilled shooter and archer: skills that only grew when she got engaged to Hunter (whose name was an accurate summation of his primary interests).

Family is at the center of hunting culture for thousands of hunters across the nation. People hunt to keep their families fed, to cut down on costs, and provide healthy, sustainable food. People also hunt because they value the chance to connect with family, as Stacey described.

No obstacle can stop her and Hunter from participating in the outdoor sports they enjoy so much. But parenthood has required at least a little bit of slowing down. Stacey and Hunter now have two young daughters. She hunted turkey through her first pregnancy, and baby Audrey was an established member of our deer camp that year. Though full of its own rewards, motherhood has historically presented a barrier to women hunters, since women have long been regarded as the primary caregivers, leaving men free to wander off for all-boys hunting weekends. It's a point of tension in many families.

But these are different times, and Hunter and Stacey balance their parenting to make sure there's still room for hunting, fishing, and plenty of time outdoors as they raise their girls.

"I look forward to what we can teach them," Stacey said. "They'll be able to watch us. We aren't going to force them; we want them to want to get involved." Little Audrey

and Josie have already been on their fair share of hikes and fishing excursions, and I don't think it will be too long before the ladies outnumber the men at our deer camp.

Hunting as a practice requires the passing of knowledge and skill from one generation to the next. Almost every hunter can name one or two specific mentors: a knowledgeable, more experienced person, with whom they have formed a close learning relationship. Many, like me, have a readily available familial mentor: a grandfather, parent, uncle, cousin. Others need to work a little harder to find someone with the time, patience, and skill and to introduce them to the world of hunting.

The R3 initiatives designed to get more hunters in the woods have found that sustained mentorship is one of the most important factors in whether or not a new hunter will stick with the practice. My dad learned his outdoor skills from his uncle John. I never knew either of my grandfathers, which is likely why I've always enjoyed spending time with the old-time hunters who strike me as grandfatherly. Many of them are extremely encouraging, especially to new hunters and women hunters.

At Deep Portage, there was Norm Moody. Norm was a board member at the camp, not directly responsible for any of the programming, but you could find him there almost every day, helping out with tasks around the gun range and socializing with staff. With his worn ballcap, oversize glasses, and shaggy white mustache, he looked the part of an old-time hunter. Our most popular camp of the summer was Upland Bird Camp,

and Norm was there for every minute of it. Upland bird hunting was his own passion, and he even delivered a few lectures and answered questions for our curious campers.

Norm's best act of the week was when he brought in a whole prairie chicken carcass and showed the boys firsthand how to clean and dress it. My campers pressed around in a tight circle to get a peek at one of the dining room tables. I'd never personally dressed a bird, despite the pheasant hunts of my youth, so I made sure I wasn't blocking any of my campers as I also leaned in to watch. My intense interest in the bird must have caught Norm's attention. The other counselors were either repulsed by the activity, or the experienced ones like Joey had already seen it too many times for it to warrant much excitement.

The next morning I was pouring out some morning coffee in the staff canteen when he approached me with a parcel wrapped in newspaper. "Here," he said. "I thought you and the staff might like to have this."

Inside was a prairie chicken from Norm's last hunting season. I'd never seen one before, never mind eaten one. I took the package from him thankfully and made sure to memorize one of his favorite game bird recipes: stuff it with jalapenos and wrap it in bacon.

"The sheer nutritional density of meat has always made it a precious form of social currency among hunter-gatherers," Michael Pollan wrote, when another hunter shared meat with him after his own unsuccessful hunt. "Since the successful hunter often ends up with more meat than he and his family could eat before it spoiled, it makes good sense for him to, in effect, bank the surplus in the bodies of other people, trading meat for obligations and future favors."

Indeed, I've always sensed a sort of taboo around asking other people for wild meat. Freely given, it is a generous gift; a sharing of the time and effort it took to secure such nourishment. I was honored to accept the prairie chicken from Norm, and once again, marveled at the complexity of the social transactions that occur between hunters.

Many hunters reference solitude as an important part of their experience. The quiet stillness required by the act of hunting, along with the type of full-body awareness of what is happening in the immediate environment, is reminiscent of meditation. The time alone is certainly one of the things I enjoy most about hunting.

In the course of my studies at the University of Montana, I met Krista, a fellow writer and outdoorswoman. She told me that there was something in particular about being alone while hunting that resonated with her. "I love to hunt with people, but I've only ever shot an animal when I've been alone, " she said. "Those times that it's just me and the animal. That hasn't been choice, just circumstance. There is something to being alone, reckoning with it yourself. It's special with other people too. It is meaningful both ways, but it does feel a little bit different to be alone."

Some people do hunt completely alone, but it can be an incredible task for a person on their own. Groups of hunters often mean shared resources and ready help—something that might be extremely handy with difficult physical tasks, such as packing an elk out of the high country. For some, it's a chance to connect with and test one's own ability to survive and provide for oneself. Solitude in wild spaces can also reflect the

long-held, colonialist narrative of conquering the wilderness. Although they're the narratives we've grown up with and that made us love nature for what it was, the days of "man alone in the wilderness" are mostly an idealized fiction. As much as the classic literary struggle of man vs. nature titillates us in storytelling (even recently, films such as *The Grey* and *The Revenant* have popularized this trope), the truth is, the "wilderness" is full of people, and has been for thousands of years.

To me, hunting camp offers a communal experience, of a type far different from any other kind of social gathering in my life. I can't imagine ever having gotten started hunting without this singular form of community. Yet, many people can, and do. I've been privileged to know some of them.

When I met Preston and Laura at college in St. Paul, they were exactly the kind of people from whom I tried to hide my affinity for killing sports. I was a shy undergraduate working as a copy editor at the student newspaper, but Laura was a gregarious page designer who took nothing seriously and always cracked jokes as I handed my copy edits to her on Sunday afternoons. Her boyfriend Preston was a photographer for the newspaper. The two of them had been dating since high school, and I soon became fast friends with them both.

Preston and Laura were what I think of as epicures: great appreciators of the fine and wonderful things in the world. Their taste was global in scope and their friendliness was boundless and absorbing. I remember early on when we became friends, Laura

invited me to her dorm room for an evening drinking tea steeped in a French press and eating Japanese candy. We sat on the floor of her dorm, but somehow it felt like some kind of refined indulgence. We talked late into the night, swapping stories about ghosts and weird family members.

When I met them, Laura was a committed vegetarian. The first time I ever tried sushi was vegetarian sushi that she had rolled herself and brought as a snack to a meeting of the Women's Resource Center to which she'd invited me. Laura was more strict about her vegetarianism, and Preston also ate very little meat, if any. Both of them were adventurous, and open-minded.

As I got to know them, I learned that Preston had an outdoorsy streak. He'd been a Boy Scout growing up, and enjoyed camping. Soon enough, the three of us were going on weekend camping trips. In the summer of 2014, we embarked on a 7-day cycle trip from St. Paul to the port of Duluth, on Lake Superior. The trip took us north up historic Highway 61 and then on the railroad bed of the Willard Munger Trail, cutting through some of Minnesota's most incredible northwoods scenery. As we journeyed together, I liked to keep track of some of the fantasy themes that emerged in our conversation and jokes.

Fantasy theme analysis, also known as symbolic convergence theory, is a concept I learned as a communication studies major, and one of my favorite things to watch for in group interactions. Fantasy themes are recurring forms of communication that reinforce group identity through a shared narrative—this could be through repeated inside jokes, or sometimes direct comparison of the group's experience to other narratives: at various times our bicycle journey was likened to everything from *The Lord of the Rings* to *Shrek*.

Group cohesiveness grows stronger when individuals build fantasy themes like these into their common experience together, according to symbolic convergence theory. This type of communication occurs across all kinds of small groups, but I've noticed it particularly in groups with a strong objective—like biking 150 miles to Duluth.

It was a little bit of a surprise to me when Preston reached out to me in 2016 to tell me he was planning to hunt for the first time. After all, I'd watched him and Laura work around restaurant menus for the vegetarian-friendly options for long enough. But both of them had shifted their lifestyle over the years as well: Laura became a pescatarian, adding fish into her diet, and both of them ate meat when it made sense for calories on our long-distance bike trip.

I immediately invited Preston to join us at our deer camp for the Wisconsin rifle season. I'd never had a friend interested in hunting before. I hadn't hunted since those failed attempts in the ground blind in high school, but I found my interest in the sport suddenly renewed.

I remember reading a study that showed that the children of English-speaking immigrants, after a certain age, began imitating the accent of their peers at school rather than retaining their parents' accent. The study supported the theory that the influence of peers became stronger and more important to children than parental influence. I think it may have been something like this that made me so eager to invite Preston to hunt with us. I'd never had any choice of who I hunted with before, and it made a difference to have a peer present rather than the same slew of relatives, all of whom had more experience than me, and acted more as instructors than comrades.

The necessity of peers, rather than mentors, is actually an important part of getting new women hunters started in the sport. A few weeks ago, I talked to Marcia Brownlee, who works with Artemis, a hunting and conservation group based in western Montana. Artemis advocates and provides support for the participation of women in outdoor and shooting sports, and has members across the nation. Marcia has found that her hunting experiences have differed drastically from times when she was hunting with men vs. hunting with women, just due to overarching cultural norms and social dynamics.

"When a woman walks into that type of environment, she's assumed to be a novice," Marcia said. "When I go into that, I automatically go in defensive. I don't want to ask questions, because I don't want to prove them right. I feel like I've got something to prove. That's broadly speaking. I've hunted with men who are amazing teachers, and once you're comfortable, the dynamics change." But when she began hunting with groups of all women, the difference was extreme.

"When you walk into a group of women, there is a communication habit that we all have that the good of the community is more important than the good of the individual. So asking questions, and assuming that somebody else has contributions to make happens a little more naturally in that environment. Defenses are down, communication style a little bit better. If I ask a question, they're not going to make assumptions about my skill or knowledge level, and I found myself willing to take more chances, and willing to own my decision-making process," Marcia said.

While I'd been lucky to have a mix of men and women at my hunting camp, I'd grown used to being the novice in that space. With the addition of Preston to our camp, I was glad to know I would no longer be the only one.

On a personality level, Preston was a lot different from my familial hunting companions. I would even consider him one of the "hipster hunters" Matt Dunfee of the Wildlife Management Institute described to *Outdoor News*. The type who are motivated by sustainable, ecologically conscious meat; not so much by antlers and trophies. I'd struggled with understanding my family's motivations for hunting; to me, it appeared that it was mostly borne of unquestioned family tradition. But Preston's motivations were well researched and informed, and it reaffirmed many of the doubts I'd had about hunting to have Preston as a member of my hunting camp. I was excited to get back to the woods and hunt beside a friend.

Our particular deer camp is extravagant, by some standards. When I worked at my hometown newspaper, we used to occasionally run columns written by Jim Bennett, outdoorsman on the Wisconsin side of the river. During deer season, his columns often waxed rhapsodic about rustic deer camps of the mid-1900s.

Often they were little more than a shack or a tent; a dry place to sleep and cook during the deer season. Groups of hunters—all men, naturally—lived off "camp meat;" sometimes an illegally harvested doe that sustained them for the week. Bennett described the garb of such hunters, who didn't wear blaze orange, but flannel shirts and wool pants. He described with relish the rifles they carried, such as classic Winchesters—"the gun that won the West."

"For me, the best thing about the old pictures of these ancient deer camps was how the men always posed and held their guns," Bennett wrote. "No one smiled during these pictures and every man in the photo carried a classic deer rifle. You could tell which deer they shot by where they were standing and how they were standing."

I definitely understand the fascination with such historic photos of hunting camps. They have an attractive sort of simplicity; they give the same satisfaction of drinking coffee from a tin cup by the campfire, or lighting the wick of an oil lantern. Aldo Leopold documented this desire to return to humanity's history in *A Sand County Almanac* as "the split-rail value."

"There is value in any experience that reminds us of our distinctive national origins and evolution, i.e. that stimulates awareness of history. Such awareness is 'nationalism' in its best sense," he wrote.

The impulse of a young boy to go "Daniel Booneing in the willow thicket behind the tracks" is an example of this impulse, as is the tendency to become nostalgic about deer camps of the past. But those pictures of the past are simplistic, and only a part of the larger story of hunting in the U.S. As a newer hunter (and as a millennial), it gets tiresome to hear over and over about how things were different in the old days; there were fewer rules, things were better then. The photos Jim Bennett refers to are fascinating to examine, but they also leave me with so many questions. I want to know who these men are and how they know each other; what brings them to this deer camp from year to year. And I especially want to know where the women and minorities are: I now know that they were always present, but history hasn't chosen to memorialize them in a way that Jim Bennett ever wrote a column about.

Each hunting camp has its own year-to-year traditions and quirks. Hunting camp practices can be almost ritualistic, and can serve to reaffirm group cohesiveness and shared identity. Just to transplant from one hunting camp to another might be like entering a new culture, where one must hang back and observe, learn the terms and the places, before becoming an accepted member of the group.

Krista told me that one of her hunting group traditions is that every animal killed receives a name based on the details of the hunt: one year, she brought down the Bear Road Buck, and was able to appreciate that individual animal as she pulled the frozen meat from her freezer long after hunting season ended. My cousin Sarah fondly recalled the tradition of buying a new turkey call with her dad every season when she was young. Parts of our land became named for things that happened there. The land itself became an exercise in symbolic convergence theory, a physical story map of what it meant to the hunters who chose to spend their time there.

In addition to reaffirmation of group identity, the social atmosphere of hunting can also present many challenges. Every year, it puts me in close contact with people with whom I do not normally associate, whose social and political views differ greatly from my own.

There's no easy way to exist comfortably in a space where your values are called into question. It's constantly like being in "Thanksgiving dinner" mode: you know your

family is going to bring up some topics you'd rather not discuss, and it's up to you to navigate the conversation as best you can without compromising your own values.

For the duration of hunting season, conversation mostly steers away from controversial topics; at least in my family. In some places, I imagine it's a time for people with similar worldviews to gripe together. Gossip has long been recognized as a sociological bonding practice. Evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar compared human gossiping to primate grooming behavior, where instead of picking off fleas and dirt, we talk to each other. Some types of gossip can reinforce correct and incorrect behaviors—something that takes on extra meaning in a hunting camp, where the ethics and judgments of particular actions come into play. Everyone in hunting camps has heard stories of "that hunter," the one who takes poor shots, the one who baits deer, the one flirts with legalities. These camp conversations can play a role in reinforcing what level of ethics are acceptable to the members of the camp.

In recent history, there's a tradition of hunting camps being largely wife-less places; these almost all-male gathering spaces have long offered a forum to complain about the women in their lives. All people need spaces to vent about certain things in their life, and historically, hunting camps have offered all-male spaces to do just that. But it depends on your camp.

That kind of talk doesn't go over so well at our deer camp, especially considering that more than one woman is often present. When comments begin to take a sexist or a racist bent, I try to push back against them. But anyone who has been in this "Thanksgiving dinner" type of family atmosphere knows the stressful challenge of family

politics. Most everyone wants to leave the table still friends, still willing to see each other at next year's table. It always requires good sense and the ability to walk a fine line.

So much of my personal hunting experience has evolved around the tradition of Thanksgiving, especially since it overlaps with the nine-day rifle hunting season in Wisconsin.

It has long been one of my favorite holidays of the year. My family usually hosts at our Wisconsin cabin; various relatives may or may not be staying the night in order to use the place as a base for deer hunting in the morning, or as a way to be closer to the traditional family pheasant hunt the following day.

Thanksgiving is always a good time to appreciate the bounty of the land; a sentiment tied closely to many people's experience of hunting. My appreciation of the holiday is complicated. In the same way I enjoy hunting while holding reservations about shooting a living animal, I enjoy Thanksgiving while acknowledging its role in the complete cultural brainwashing of the colonial genocide and oppression of the indigenous people of North America. Despite the adoption of the myth of turkey at the table, we know that the Wampanoag provided the main course of venison for the Pilgrims at Plymouth back in 1621. We also know that despite the idealized legend of Indians and Pilgrims making peace over a hearty meal, the event pastes over the following centuries of violence against the indigenous people of the continent with one broad stroke. It's something I try to remain aware of and bring up in discussion, even as I relish in our

extended family Thanksgiving feast. Last year, I brought out a Dakota language workbook I'd picked up and we learned a few words to describe the food we were eating. After the dinner, we all stretched out in the bunk room, digesting and chatting. Still thinking on the theme of indigenous land, I began sharing some of the things I'd learned in my Traditional Ecological Knowledge course at the university. "There's not really such a thing as wilderness, when you think about it," I said to my family in the room. "Humans have been shaping the land on this continent for thousands of years."

"So you're saying that God put Indians here to take care of the earth," said my uncle.

"Well..." I thought for a second. "Yeah."

His interpretation aligned with mine more neatly than I expected. The tension in the conversation ended; we moved on to a new topic. That might be as much as our opinions on the matter would ever overlap, but it felt like a success. In his mind, he'd put me (an agnostic) in my place by proving God's will, and I was satisfied that he considered something new about the nation's standard historical narrative. The conflict of tensions doesn't always have such a neat ending at hunting camp, but the room for conversation is there, as well as the potential for growth of understanding, for all parties involved.

In addition to cultivating many kinds of relationships among people, hunting spaces also allow the cultivation of relationships with the natural world. This is

particularly prominent in American Indian hunting practices, which are deeply spiritual and housed in a worldview that recognizes the close interrelatedness of all of creation.

My parents came from strong Polish Catholic and Irish Catholic upbringings. For years, our whole family dressed up every Sunday and went off to Mass at St. Mary of the Lake. At one point, my brother just absolutely refused to go anymore, and that was sort of the end of our church attendance as a family unit. My dad and I rarely ever go to church at all, except sometimes on those special occasions, and to humor my mom. I'd never felt there was anything there that I could really connect to.

The last time I hunted, I clambered out of my tree stand at dusk and treaded back toward the house. There was no point in trying to muffle my steps—daylight had gone and shooting hours were over. But I went quietly anyway, and paused as I spotted what looked like a moving figure traipsing down the trail in the dim light. It turned out to be my dad, heading back at the same moment. I was surprised: it always seemed like he was able to stick out the cold and dark longer than me. I was pleased to have matched him in something.

We walked along the trail side by side. He seemed unusually consumed with thought, but suddenly he spoke.

"You know, this is pretty much like church for me," he said.

I was astounded by these words. I couldn't recall a single incident in my life where he and I had discussed religion, but I understood immediately. A church pew was not where my dad found peace, solace, and faith. It was here. This was that place.

"I think I know what you mean," I said, remembering the way all my senses were alive at once, consumed with no particular thoughts, besides breathing everything in. And

then a sort of gratitude—not specifically for my quarry, but sort of just for all of it, for my own presence here in the woods, among the beings of the world under the open sky. Nothing in my whole Catholic childhood had ever compelled me to feel this way, but I wondered if this was anything similar to the emotional reward that must exist for the devout.

As we draped our layers over the chairs and tables, and propped our rifles in the gun rack, I felt like I'd suddenly understood something about my father's experience of hunting that had eluded me for years, something I'd been incurably curious about but didn't know quite how to ask.

Since then, I've questioned many hunters about whether they felt there was some spiritual aspect about hunting for them. Almost everyone, regardless of religious tradition, agreed they had felt that there was a spiritual level to their hunting experiences. Many of them expressed their belief that a successful hunt is a gift. In many American Indian traditions, hunted animals offer themselves in agreement with the hunter; among the Christian-minded the deer might be provided by God, like manna in the desert. Many people feel the impulse to express gratitude through various rituals after a successful kill: European traditions give animals the "last bite" by putting a green branch in their mouths as a gesture of respect, and some people whisper a quiet prayer of thanks. It was hard to know what to do when faced with the first animal I'd killed, and even more difficult to reconcile the action with the intense guilt and shame I felt for taking a life.

But it was the supportive and congratulatory reaction of the others hunters in the camp that reassured me that what I'd done was not completely reprehensible, but part of a long tradition of connecting people, animals, and landscapes. I expect I will wrestle with

my feelings about hunting for the rest of my life, but even as I do, I will be surrounded by hunters undergoing the same struggles, and willing to share the wisdom collected through their own experiences.

Chapter 5: Ethics and Sustainability



On one of the family Thanksgiving pheasant hunts, which blur together in the memory, I watched one of my uncles cut the head off of a whitetail buck we found freshly dead at the edge of a field.

It was sort of a freak incident: I remember the buck was missing one leg from the knee down, but seemed otherwise in perfect health. Dad said that sometimes, hunters who missed their target shot the leg off their deer by mistake, but I saw up close that the leg wasn't a raw wound: it was a fleshy nub that had cleanly healed over. This deer had survived on three legs for who knows how long, and had presumably been shot dead and lost to a hunter somewhere in this vicinity. There was no decomposition. The clues and

details of the story whizzed through my mind, and then somehow or other, my uncle produced a bone saw.

I'd never seen such butchery first hand: I watched partly in horror and partly in curiosity as he switched knives and sawed through the vertebrae with a sound surprisingly dry and loud, like a wooden board. He hefted the disembodied head by an antler and dropped it in the back of his pickup truck.

Later I learned that he got into quite a bit of trouble over this incident. The property owner had shot that deer and hadn't yet found the carcass; by all hunting codes, the antlers were technically his. There are property disputes of this variety by the thousands when it comes to hunting: whose land did the animal cross onto, who took the fatal shot? To whom go the spoils, and to whom, the blame? There are so many questions that can't exactly be settled by the booklet of regulations the DNR hands out with your hunting license each year.

I think back to this moment often: the shock of seeing a body dismembered before me, accompanied by the smoggy sensation that something here wasn't quite right. I still can't quite put my finger on it: it was a combination of things. The fact that it took my uncle only a few minutes to decide he'd found something he wanted to keep badly enough to saw through its bones. The fact he clearly didn't plan to do the reasonable thing and tell the landowner about this. It was greedy, shady, low. Even as a child who had never touched a gun, I already knew that this was not the kind of hunting I respected, and not the kind of hunter I wanted to be.

For new hunters in particular, the ethics of hunting are at the center of the decision whether or not to hunt. Unlike people who have grown up with hunting as a way of life in their family, their decision may weigh a little more heavily, since it differs from and may even go against the values held by their friend and family groups.

Al Cambronne noted the phenomenon in his book *Deerland: America's Hunt for Ecological Balance and the Essence of Wildness*. "At this very moment other hunters are bringing the sport new traditions and cultural norms of their own. They're mindful, self-aware, and more than a little self-conscious of what all this means. They ask 'How?' but they also ask 'Why?' They don't come from hunting families, and their beliefs, values, and motives are often entirely different. To start with, most of them couldn't care less about antlers."

People outside the hunting community sometimes don't understand that there are many types of hunters, with separate identities, motivations, and codes of ethics. People who denigrate hunting across the board might not know that even other hunters look down on poachers and those whose ethical choices are not up to snuff. These different groups sort themselves out according to their own particular practices and beliefs, and definitely have strong opinions about other types of hunting groups.

The history of hunting is colored by class and gender dynamics, which has fluctuated widely over time. For years, "pot hunting" —valuing meat over a prize animal—was denigrated by trophy hunters and associated with lower-class desperation, while hunting for the most mature and aesthetically pleasing animals was considered a

refined sport. Today, however, many people perceive hunting merely for the trophy at the end as shallow and greedy.

A 2019 study in the *Journal of Rural Studies* investigated the differences between communities of hunters, with an eye toward current trends in how methods of hunting shape identity. "Showing that you care about wildlife has become a new sign you are an ethical hunter today, and this may be central to the identity of many ecocentric hunters, and not least, to their outside representation to society," wrote the study's authors.

As hunting communities change in the coming years, there is no doubt that tension between communities will arise even more noticeably. Newer hunters who come into spaces from urban and suburban communities do not have a shared social history with longtime "local" hunters, which presents a threat for those ensconced in their hunting traditions.

"Urban outsiders coming to hunt cannot as easily be coordinated on the basis of shared norms. Hence, they represent a danger," wrote the authors of the 2019 study. "Outsiders" are routinely denigrated and blamed for problems among established hunting communities, but if outdoor organizations hope to be successful with recruitment and retention efforts, it will more than likely require an attitude adjustment on the part of old and new hunters alike as they interact with groups that were previously distant.

I've been fascinated to see conversations about ethics unfold in online hunting groups. One of the classic debates, for example, is the fact that many hunters consider it unsporting to hunt in high-fence enclosures. These enclosures are basically hunting farms, which raise deer that have been genetically selected to grow large antlers. These animals are not roaming about in the wild. People pay thousands of dollars to guarantee

their trophy rack, although the Boone and Crockett club, which keeps a national register of trophy animals, will not include such animals in its trophy records.

Here is part of a conversation I observed about high-fence enclosures in a hunting group on Facebook:

User 1:"[Three thumbs down emojis] Fenced in and fed protein all their life for Rich people to shoot and then brag about killing. Shameless killers..."

User 2:"you must be in the wrong group Cupcake. This is a hunting group. We kill stuff and yes, then we brag about it. [two crying/laughing emojis]"

The stark difference in outlook between these two hunters is an excellent example of how hunters' actions shape their identity. User 2 is the type of hunter who repulsed me from the sport when I was young: the braggadocio alone was nauseating to me, seeming to lack respect for the animal. On the flip side, User 2 considered hunters such as User 1 and myself as "cupcakes:" soft and emotional, something that in his mind does not have a place in hunting culture. These kinds of interactions are bound to become even more frequent as hunting communities become less and less homogenized.

For many hunters, online media spaces can provide shared resources, but they also provide a forum for hunters to check and police what they see as inappropriate behavior. In another hunting-related post, a woman shared the details of some night-vision equipment she'd acquired. Many people in the comments were quick to inform her that this method of hunting was likely illegal in her state; information of which she had previously been unaware. Although hunters are reminded again and again to familiarize

themselves with yearly regulations (and usually provided a current regulation booklet with the sale of their hunting license), the wide variety of hunters includes some who see the legal requirements more like suggestions. Some are not interested in changing the way they've done things for years because of the words the government printed in a booklet.

Hunting rules are bent often, and it's not always easy to communicate that not all hunters disregard written and unwritten rules of common decency. Yet as a group, hunters are also beholden to the actions of those who willingly flout common codes of ethics.

Poaching is one of the biggest topics of concern when it comes to hunting ethics. Steve Eliason, a sociology professor at University of Montana-Billings, has interviewed many game wardens about poaching. "In the hunting community, the worst thing you can be is a poacher," he told Montana Public Radio. "So a lot of people, even if they admit they've done something wrong, they don't want to be referred to as a poacher, and it has a stigma in the hunting community."

Reports of poaching in Montana have been increasing over the years. In days past, wardens often found only gut piles as evidence of poachers. Today, headless carcasses are more common, indicating that people are hunting more for trophy than for meat. Eliason suggested that social media is a double-edged sword, allowing hunters to police each other, but also placing a high value of impressive trophies.

The desire for a trophy display can be a huge motivation, even for hunters more interested in meat than antlers. There's a spirit of competitiveness in hunting, and a

certain status awarded to the person who can shoot the biggest buck or net the biggest fish. The allure is so strong that people frequently disobey the law for it.

Occasionally, my dad and I attend regional outdoor expos. One of my favorite exhibitors that is always in attendance at these functions is the Wall of Shame. The Wall of Shame includes a wide variety of taxidermied and mounted trophies that have been repossessed from poachers who took them illegally. Each mount includes a little story about how the poacher was caught, emphasizing the heroics of law enforcement officials. There's always a satisfying sense of justice in looking at this wall and knowing that someone went through the work of acquiring this animal outside of the law, purely for the ability to show it off, only to be finally deprived of the trophy. I wonder how many of those poachers changed their ways, and how many just learned to cover their tracks a little better.

Trapper Peak is a pointy, snowy little mountaintop rising in the distance over Highway 93 in Darby, Montana. On an outrageously sunny day last November, I joined Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks officer Rebecca Mowry at a run-down camper trailer on the side of the road. We sat in folding chairs beside the northbound lane and watched rough-winged hawks and golden eagles case the farm fields in front of us.

Every few minutes, a large truck or two pulled up next to us and rolled down a window. "Good hunt today?" one of us would ask. My eyes were often drawn to an uncased rifle or handgun, sitting like a guest of honor in the front passenger seat.

"Didn't see much," was the reply, half the time. The others didn't need to say: the answer was written all over their beaming faces and in their scurry to unwrap the tarp at the back of their truck and show us today's lucky shot.

As a volunteer at this hunter check station, my job was to assist Rebecca by greeting each carload of hunters, inquiring if they had any game with them, and if so, taking a look at the animal, its tags, and the hunter's license to ensure everything was legal and accounted for. Every state handles hunter check stations a little differently. I couldn't ever remember passing one during my hunting seasons in Wisconsin, but in Montana, every hunter coming through Darby was required by law to stop and check in.

I saw a lot of dead deer in the backs of cars that day. Hunter check stations such as this one collect data about the animals harvested, numbers that inform hunting regulations for the next year. Rebecca's data collection included the sex and age of each animal, so I even tried my hand at prying open the jaws of a dead deer to get a look at its teeth—the best way to tell a deer's age.

Some hunter check stations provide testing equipment for chronic wasting disease. CWD—a fatal nervous system disease affecting members of the deer family—has been spreading through North American wildlife populations rapidly in the last few decades. Testing animals at hunter check stations gives wildlife management agencies a better idea of how far and fast the disease has spread in their area.

In addition to tracking population data about game animals, the hunter check also keeps an eye on anything that might be considered unlawful. For one thing, it is illegal for hunters, regardless of whether they have their game in the vehicle or not, to drive past these checkpoints. One group of non-hunters pulled up just to let us know that it was the

carcass of a domestic bison in the back of the truck, but they thought they should stop anyway, so as not to look suspicious.

In fact, a similar misunderstanding occurred early that morning, before my arrival at the check station. Rebecca had caught a glimpse of a tarp with a couple of hooves sticking out of a truckbed, but the driver sped right past into Darby without stopping. She radioed the C.O. waiting just north of town, who ran down the suspicious truck.

"It was a cow," Rebecca laughed.

Most hunters take regulations very seriously, but almost everyone slips up sooner or later. The worst mistake we saw that day was a scruffy-looking young guy, a first time hunter, who had filled a whitetail doe tag.

"Nice," I said, looking at the limp body of the scrawny animal. Rebecca came up to look over my shoulder and immediately spotted a problem.

"Uh oh. That's a muley."

I went a little red in the face—coming from Wisconsin whitetails, the mule deer of the West were still strange and new to me. I couldn't tell the difference at first glance, the way Rebecca could. But the hunter's self-shame was a lot worse than my chagrin. He apologized again and again, sheepish.

"Don't worry," Rebecca assured him. She got the local game warden on the phone. I wasn't privy to the details, but this was clearly an honest mistake situation, which happens frequently among hunters. In a 2019 article, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reported that game wardens issued nearly double the number of warnings than citations.

"We issue far more warnings than citations because an overarching goal is to correct behaviors without negatively affecting participation," DNR enforcement officer

Greg Salo told the newspaper. "Still, anyone who intentionally tries to skirt the law has no reason to expect a warning. People who intentionally commit a crime—baiting deer, for example—deserve what they get."

Game laws are designed to protect the health of animal populations. While hunting does keep ecosystems in check—particularly with white-tailed deer, which are overpopulated in many areas of the country—wildlife managers must balance the numbers carefully to ensure the population remains strong enough to play its role in the ecosystem.

Methodology comes with its own do's and don'ts; some of which are legally defined, and some of which are left up to personal taste. Baiting deer, as Salo observed, is illegal in Minnesota, but many states don't punish this behavior by law. Even where it's legal, some hunters consider putting out food to attract animals as a form of cheating. But the rules change according to context: most hunters are fine with the idea of baiting bear, which are extremely difficult to locate in any other way. For several seasons, my dad has ploughed and planted food plots on our property to draw in deer; a practice which isn't legally considered baiting, but which might be frowned upon by hunters who believe that such a practice gives an unfair advantage to the hunter by essentially tricking the deer into performing new food-motivated behaviors. These hunters have a deeper respect for hunters who relying on tracking and stalking skills to locate animals, without manipulating the animal's habitat. Thousands of words have been spent on what is and is not correct behavior, but ultimately, some things are left up to the individual hunter.

Late afternoon at the hunter check station, a man brought in an animal I'd never seen before: a bighorn sheep. Rebecca had him pull aside because this particular check

was a little more rigorous than the others. This was a notable animal; several hunters stopping through with deer stepped away from their own trucks to take a look at the ram.

Bighorn sheep populations declined severely in the 1800s, mostly due to competition with domestic livestock, loss of habitat, disease, and overhunting. With the improvement of rangeland conditions, regulated hunting, and transplantation, the sheep have made a comeback in the state, but opportunities to hunt them are still fairly limited, and there are very strict rules about where and which particular animals can be hunted. Some studies have found that trophy hunting pressures have even begun to affect the size of the sheep's horns, as larger animals are removed from the herds and don't have the chance to pass on their genes to the next generation. Hunters who want to pursue bighorn sheep have to apply through a lottery system; drawing a sheep tag is considered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The dismembered head of the bighorn sat on the tailgate, dead gummy eyes tilted at the sky. A long, neat row of herbivorous teeth showed through its sagging lower lip. It seemed a sad end for such a majestic-looking animal. The hunter told us how this ram had been butting heads with a rival that very morning.

The hunter chatted with Rebecca as she painstakingly measured the rings of horn segments of the sheep to tell its age. Then she punched a small metal plug into the back of the horn, near the ear, to indicate this animal had been taken legally.

When it comes to hunting ethics, one question stands at the center of it all: can I justify taking the life of a fellow living creature?

It's the question I have struggled with for years, and one that new hunters pose to themselves constantly as they undertake the journey to becoming competent killers. It's the thing that stands between the 80 percent of people who approve of hunting sports, and the 4 percent who actually participate in them.

Thousands of hunters and thinkers have reasoned it out through the centuries; many of them have written down their thought process for other hunters to consider. Many take the argument that hunting is a fulfillment of our biological design as omnivores. After all, other animals prey upon and consume animals for nourishment; why is it such a big deal that humans do the same? In answer, some might say that the need to do so is obsolete. Most Americans could get by just fine without hunting wild animals for meat. That to go out of our way to do such a thing is cruel and needless.

The arguments have gone back and forth for as long as there have been hunters and non-hunters, but once again, the choice is left to the individual, and how hunting fits into their greater philosophical worldview.

Compassion plays a large role in hunting. Most hunters do not want the animals they pursue to suffer, and continually practice their skills to make sure the shots they take will kill the animals as quickly and efficiently as possible.

In one episode of Steven Rinella's *Meat Eater* TV series, he took two first-time hunters to find turkey in the hills of Montana. One them said she'd heard that many first-time hunters start with turkey, because they're less likely to form a bond with a turkey, an awkward, alien, scaly creature, than with a large mammal, something with big brown

eyes and expressive fuzzy ears. Science supports this theory. Human survival is contingent on group cohesion and empathy between members of a group. This behavioral drive is so strong that it often extends to animals with characteristics similar to humans: often large mammals.

My compassion for animals was a large part of my reluctance to hunt when I was young, but I'd built a sort of emotional wall toward killing animals when I heard my dad talk about "getting the big buck." It did not perturb me in the least to hear him speak this way; I'd become accustomed to it. I knew where the antlers and the turkey tailfeathers on our living room wall came from.

When I came back to the hunt in 2016, I knew it was time to make the decision for real. I'd managed to squeak out of the hunting seasons in my teens without seeing a deer or taking a shot, but this time my college friend Preston was with us. His presence reinforced my reason for actually being here: suddenly it was a lot more than just not wanting to disappoint my dad. It was not wanting to look like a fool and a wimp in front of my friend. If I wanted to be taken seriously as a hunter, it was time to actually hunt.

I let the particularities go. This time, I clambered up into a tree stand like the rest of the hunters. Instead of crumpling away at the first tingle of numb toes, I challenged myself to stay out in the winter air for as long as I could stand it. 30 more minutes. 30 more minutes and then I can think about going in. And when 30 minutes arrived—surely I could stand just 30 more?

On opening morning, we traipsed into the woods and split off toward our individual posts. I was warm from the hike up, but soon began to chill, and tried my best to distract myself from the cold. I immersed my attention in the woods around me.

Never had I seen the kind of stillness, the type of steel watchful grayness, of a forest of poplar trees in the moments before dawn. From the suburban surroundings I'd grown up in, I'd always assumed that nothing much happened outside in the month of November, and from then on until maybe March or April. But there was so much to see among the dead leaves and rotting stumps here. The moment the sun came shooting through the branches, a red squirrel emerged from its den in the same pile of deadfall and busied itself about its daily work. Downy woodpeckers visited the standing snags around me. A pair of plump ruffed grouse came clucking along the forest floor, right beneath me, bobbing in a chickenish parade.

This is what my dad loved about hunting, I realized. He'd told so many stories of chickadees that landed on his hands, his head. Once, of an owl that unwittingly perched so close to him, he could have touched it.

I came back to full attention as rustling manifested itself into the form of a deer before my eyes. Several deer. I tightened my grip on the rifle. It was a troop of does. They tiptoed single file across the dead leaves, right toward me, right under the stand where I was sitting. They weaved so closely together, dodging the same way around the same obstacles. They were a unit.

I readied my rifle, but knew I wouldn't take this. How could I destroy this group of does, this little band, this family?

Sentimental. How would I explain this to my dad and my hunting companions without sounding silly, or childish? No one had ever said these things about hunting to me, expressed these feelings. Perhaps I wasn't meant to be a hunter. I let the does pass by.

But I was already here. I had the tags and everything; my dad paid for it all. He was so happy to have me along. So I sat. And I waited.

Finally, when the sun was well up, the temperature finally bearable, he came through. Close range.

He passed behind a line of brush, but I knew for sure that I saw antlers on his head. Does were fine, but there's a certain type of reverence for a buck. I knew my dad would be impressed with this. And even better, the buck was alone. If not for the group of does that came by earlier, he might not have seemed so much less sympathetic in comparison. He moved slowly, picking his way across roots hidden under dead leaves.

My heart seemed to jump into my head, my entire body pumping hot blood in gigantic beat after beat. My arms grew jellied with adrenaline as I shed my deerskin mittens into my lap, and grasped the rifle securely. I pressed it into the crook of my shoulder, leaned into it, and in a fumbling motion that dropped my stomach 15 feet to the forest floor, clicked the safety off.

I was being so loud; why didn't the deer seem to hear me? He didn't move away, didn't run. So careful. I sighted my scope behind his shoulder, at the ribcage—was I breathing loud? Was I breathing?—and pressed my index finger slowly on the trigger.

I didn't hear the shot, but my ears rang. My eyes never left the buck. He jolted forward at my shot—jolted at the same time I jolted from the power of the weapon. We moved in unison, the buck and I, synced. But after he kicked out his legs and jumped forward, he slowed, and eased himself down into a blackberry patch. He was deliberate in his movements; his head stayed erect. He held his position, casting doubt on my shot—had I somehow missed him? What was he doing?

But then, I saw his head slump to the side, disappearing among the blackberry thorns. He was dead.

A well of adrenaline suddenly burst in my chest. My face grew hot and then: tears. Plump, salty, painting over my face, soaking into my scarf and coat and hood. I sat there in silence and tears for moments that seemed like days.

Then suddenly, it stopped. I blinked a few times, sucked in a bit of the frosty November air. I put my gun back on safety, propped it in my stand, and began the climb downward to go see for myself.

That hunting year was an extremely unusual one. Maybe it was sometime after, or sometime before, but our woods sang with close gunshots that morning. Before noon, Preston, my dad, and myself had all harvested our rifle season buck.

I still wasn't certain about what I'd done that morning. I'd stood over my buck in the blackberry patch, staring downward at his blank eyes, imploring him to somehow read my thoughts and recognize that I was sorry and thankful and that I appreciated him. Later that morning, my doubts were assuaged by the congratulatory comments of my dad and the other members of our hunting party. I'd finally fulfilled what I'd set out to do. That, in itself, was a relief.

After a successful hunt, my dad's usual practice was to bring deer carcasses in to the meat processor on Highway 8, but Preston had a different approach. In his immense

research on the topic of hunting, he made certain that he knew the basics of how to butcher and save the meat from the deer himself.

Preston spent a good couple of hours slaving away at the carcass of his deer, which was strung from the buck pole just outside the kitchen window. Dad sat back with a Diet Coke and laughed about Preston's total commitment to the butchery; I was just glad to sit down for a while after the energy-draining shock of my morning kill. We watched as he hacked away at the deer carcass, piece by piece. It looked like hard work. I didn't envy it, or think to help, but as I think back on it now, I wish I'd taken that opportunity to learn something, to arm myself with future knowledge about how to manage such a task. It felt a little like cheating to just drop my deer off at the meat processor and come back to neat little white packages, labeled in Sharpie.

Preston's method of butchery ensured direct connection to the meat—an element of hunting that has become increasingly attractive to new hunters concerned about sustainability and shortening the food chain. A similar motivation is what drove Tovar Cerulli, formerly a vegetarian, to turn to hunting as a source of meat, as he documented in his book *The Mindful Carnivore*.

As Cerulli points out, even the most dedicated vegan can't help benefitting from the death of animals in some way: every corn field is guarded from pest deer; every garden defended from depredation of critters like woodchucks, who often meet their end from smoke bombs or pellet guns.

People who have switched to non-meat protein, such as soy, often rely on imported foods with a huge fossil footprint. It's a no-win scenario for people concerned about the health of the planet as well as the lives of animals.

Hunting becomes especially alluring when one compares it to the living conditions of animals raised to become meals on modern farms. Animals destined for the freezer section of the grocery store often live in tightly packed quarters, and are sometimes fed things their bodies were not designed to eat in order to fatten them up faster. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Minnesota pig farmers were forced to euthanize and waste pigs that could not be accommodated within the tight deadlines of the industrial processing cycle, since processing plants were closed down. It is this type of livestock suffering that hunters looking to make more ethical decisions about their food might be thinking about.

Unlike domesticated animals, which lead very unnatural lives in order to make them as cheap and appealing as possible, wild game spend their whole lives following their biological design in the habitat best suited for them. Wild animals' existence isn't exactly a paradise: many deer starve during harsh winters, or are picked off by predators as fawns. Thousands more are hit by cars on the roadways that intersect their habitat. But between the two—life as a cow pumped with antibiotics in order to digest corn that its body is not designed to eat, vs. life as a wild deer, sheltering in thickets and nipping the sweet new buds from tamarack and willow—I know which I'd choose. Compared to death by predators, or by starvation, the nearly instantaneous death by a well-placed bullet seems preferable as well. I suppose for all practical purposes, my personal justification comes from putting myself in the body of the deer and asking myself what life I'd prefer.

I can imagine how strange it must sound to non-hunters, that deliberately taking a life is an act of compassion rather than malice. It sounds so counter-intuitive that it even evokes a sort of cult-like brainwashing when I say it out loud.

But Americans aren't likely to stop eating meat anytime soon, especially since it is one of the most efficient sources of nourishment for our omnivorous bodies. For meat eaters, hunting is one of the most sensible ways to take personal responsibility for this loss of life, rather than relying on some anonymous worker in a meat packing plant to do this work out of sight, out of mind.

Successful hunters who don't want the meat from their game also have the option of donating to programs such as Hunters Against Hunger in Montana, which provide the meat to local food shelves. Meat that is reclaimed from poachers is automatically repurposed to feed families in need.

But it's not as if wild game can function as a protein replacement at an industrial scale. The products of wild game are regulated, and cannot be legally sold for profit. Even if humanity wanted to return to subsistence on wild meat and foraged foods, we would not be able to survive on current animal populations. In fact, as Michael Pollan detailed in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, it was likely the overhunting of game that forced humans to turn from the less work-intensive activity of hunting for meat to the comparatively backbreaking labor of agriculture in the first place.

For most, wild game presents a way to stock the freezer that allows hunters to feel confident in the provenance of their food. Up against the moral and biological constraints of human culture, it represents the path of lesser evil, of greater compassion.

Among the new hunters I've talked to, many have expressed the great sense of responsibility they feel for the land they hunt on. They are taking the time to learn about ecosystem impacts of hunting, and supporting conservation initiatives that contribute to the protection and health of public lands from a whole-ecosystem perspective. Those who are motivated by trophies may not see this part of the picture, or how it figures in the general state of wildlife health. Al Cambronne recalled an incident in his book *Deerland* in which a USDA worker was trying to encourage a landowner to promote biodiversity on the property he managed. The landowner stops the USDA representative mid-sentence and says: "Wait a minute. That's nice, but I don't give a shit about the birds. I only care about deer."

This is the picture that many non-hunters have of people within the hunting community, and it can be extremely discouraging for new hunters who want to gain skills in the sport and also be active participants in their protection of the land. Lily Raff McCaulou expressed her frustration surrounding the disconnect between hunters and conservation in her book *Call of the Mild*: "Nationally, hunters are more likely to vote for property rights than for habitat protection, even as rampant development displaces game species faster than any non-human predator. Clearly, forging a connection to a place is not the same as protecting that place. If it were, all hunters would already be the staunch environmentalists they ought to be," McCaulou wrote.

Lack of respect for game animals was concerning for McCaulou, as it was for me as a young hunter, especially when hunting spaces normalize talk that make light of the

act of killing. In my interviews with more experienced hunters, I have probed to understand exactly their reaction to the act of killing, but I find it is almost always something brushed over in the hunting camps I've frequented. "As much as hunters value venison, they rarely speak aloud of the meaning and metaphysics of meat," Cambronne wrote. "To do so would be unseemly. It's just not done."

I wondered for a long time if it meant I was some kind of defective hunter, to want to talk about these things, to have them acknowledged in my deer camp. Did it mean I was too soft?

In reading the books and listening firsthand to the stories of the next generation of hunters, I learned that I am not alone in these considerations. Like so many new hunters, I am bumping against long-held traditions, and making a space for myself as a different kind of hunter, the kind who can get along in the spaces I've known all my life, but who can also envision a future where there are more people who share the same kinds of hunting values as I do. People are already building these networks: Artemis, for one, is uniting women hunters around conservation. Not just conservation of specific game animals, such as the habitat restoration accomplished by organizations such as Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited. But conservation initiatives that benefit public lands and ecosystems as a whole. There will always be differences between the ethics and practices of different groups of hunters, but I look forward to the future where everyone can find the type of group where they belong, and everyone can enjoy the sport in terms that align with their own morals and traditions.

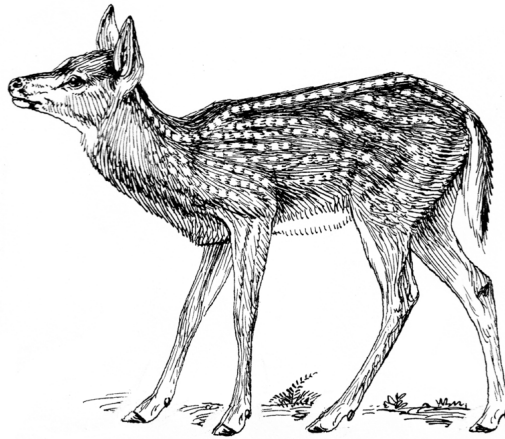
Some of my campers at Deep Portage were surprised to learn that I'd shot and killed a deer. Many of them noticed my great love and affection for the wild creatures in those woods, so I can imagine why it might have seemed unlikely to them. Not all of their counselors had real hunting experience, and I definitely leveraged it to my advantage when trying to get them to pay attention to the lesson at hand.

We stressed ethics to the campers in every lesson, from how to treat a firearm with respect to which shots are most effective to kill your prey quickly. I was thrilled to have this conversation with kids; I could feel the weight of it and could only hope this would be something they'd always remember when they hunted, a critical moment to look back to. Something opposite of my memory of my uncle in the cornfield with the bone saw.

We played ethics trivia games walking up and down the sandy trail to the gun range, doing our best to arm kids with the correct answers to their Minnesota Hunter Safety exam at the end of the week. "Good Shot/Bad Shot" even became an in-joke during the counselor's off hours; in which almost any instrument, from a chopstick to a canoe paddle, could become a firearm, and any object our desired target. A good shot meant that there was a safe backstop behind the animals, such as the ground (from an elevated position) or a dirt hillside, and there were no obstacles between your weapon and the animal's vital organs. A bad shot meant there were too many unknowns: maybe a flat surface from which bullets could ricochet, or danger to humans or other animals somewhere past your target.

Just last night I watched a trio of deer traipse across the lawn of my apartment building. One deer turned its body broadside, glowing soft orange in the light of a nearby street lamp. From the balcony of my second story apartment, the angle was almost the same as from my tree stand—a clean, unobstructed line downward at the animal's vital organs. My backstop would be a neatly trimmed field of soft grass. My aim would be straight through the heart. Good shot.

Chapter 6: Hunting and the Education of the Next Generation



It is a strange and somewhat unsettling experience to put a gun in the hands of an 11-year-old child. You've known these kids for maybe two days, and you already know which ones to worry about. You just have to trust that they've been listening and they know what to do.

Our hunting education camps were called Forkhorn, hunter slang for a young deer with only four tines, one "fork" on each side. I always thought the name was rather poetic, describing the emergence of these young kids into a more magnificent maturity, one full of the same dignity and poise as a buck stepping into a forest clearing. There wasn't much currently that was very majestic about my campers. I remembered how my younger brother was when he was around the same age, but I still wasn't fully prepared for the amount of unmitigated glee with which most of them took to gun sports.

Their perceptions of hunting were of the dispassionate variety; the thing I had so much trouble understanding through my youth. They had big dreams of landing a trophy buck, and some delighted in stories of brutality associated with hunting. One of them

described with awe how once, a relative of his had taken a bad shot and had to finish a deer off by slitting its throat with a knife.

Most of these kids came from hunting families and were already immersed in the language, values, and opinions they'd heard spouted by hunting relatives. I was highly aware of my role as an educator here, but with only one short week, I had to accept that most of their future hunting practices would be determined by the education they received from their family, for better or for worse.

Despite the trigger-happy sentiments of many of the campers, I never felt in danger on the gun range. These kids were serious about shooting.

I've always liked the structure of camp gun ranges like the one at Deep Portage: at once organized and shabby. A row of benches and tables is neatly arranged at the front, while rain drips through holes in the wooden roof, where support beams have been chewed by pesky porcupines. The sand underfoot is reminiscent of the long jump on track and field day in school. This is a place of concentration and physical prowess.

The range is loaded with invisible borders, which may or may not be crossed according to the command of the Range Master. There is a military strictness about it, an inviolable order, and even the most unruly campers seem to feel it as strongly as we do.

Poor behavior on the gun range was absolutely not tolerated at Deep Portage. For particularly misbehaved kids, the threat of not being allowed to shoot or not passing their hunter safety exams due to poor behavior was the only thing keeping them in line.

On the gun range, the impulse is to look straight ahead at the paper targets when firing commences, but I had to learn not to take my eyes off the kids' hands and arms while they held the firearm. That was where mistakes happened. Mostly it was little

things, like forgetting to switch the safety on between shots. Sometimes it was a little more serious: it's easy for kids to become distracted and forget where their muzzle is pointed. Even just a slip-up or two could result in a kid sulking on the bench, banned from shooting for the rest of the day.

"You guys take this way too seriously," one of the bratty ones told me and a couple other counselors, when we made him repeat an exercise on how to safely hand off a firearm to another person. "My dad never does it this way."

"Well, that's how we do it here," was our usual response.

Children at deer camp is nothing new, but growing up in the deer stand is bound to color the way you perceive wildlife and gun sports for the rest of your life. In 2017, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker authorized a bill that completely eliminated the age limit for mentored hunters, which had previously been set at age 12. The law requires that the child be mentored by someone older than 18 who has passed a gun safety course, and the mentor and mentee are both allowed to carry a gun, unlike the previous rule for mentored hunts, which mandated that there be only one firearm between them.

"This bill will allow responsible hunters to get kids off the couch and off the electronics and into the woods," Rep. Joel Kleefisch told the *Denver Post*. "There's nothing like seeing the look on someone's face when they harvest their first animal."

The act was opposed and ridiculed by many Wisconsinites I talked to, in and out of the hunting community.

"You know why they really did it," I heard some hunters say. "Little two-year-old Bobby can't even hold a gun, but grandpa Jim is happy to help him fill his tags."

This implied bad-faith motivation left a bad taste in my mouth; I hated to think of children being used for a grown man's extra chance to nab a buck, rather than receiving a learning experience for their own educational benefit. I'm sure many hunters' motives are above board, and some probably manage to accomplish both things at the same time. After all, people have been learning to hunt from their elders for centuries without standardized education materials and official state certification. Learning hunting skills from a family member, mentor, or teacher as a child is a cherished memory for many hunters. But as hunting numbers decline, some R3 coordinators think that educating the children of hunters is not the best method for hunter recruitment in the coming years, as it has been in the past.

"Most often, we are preaching to the choir," Chris Willard, an R3 coordinator at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, told *Outdoor Life*. "We're giving the kids of folks who already hunt this opportunity, rather than reaching new audiences."

Many hunter education classes are designed for children, which is a problem when it comes to recruiting new hunters. Recruitment efforts would be better focused instead on college-age adults, said Matt Dunfee of The Wildlife Institute.

"If you spend \$500 on a kid, the return on investment is really low," Dunfee told *Outdoor Life*. "But a young adult population from college students on up has time, has money, has solidified socially, has motivation. We've seen with pilot efforts that this audience can be motivated at a much higher rate. Your return on investment is much higher, because they'll buy a license next year and they'll take their friends."

The adult hunter has thought it out in a way the children of hunters usually don't. The problem, then, is finding the right connections and the right tools to get started.

Each November, a group of University of Montana students pack into assorted cars and trucks and make the hourlong drive to Philipsburg, to a cabin in the Rock Creek hills. I joined in to observe this hunting mentorship weekend, hosted by the student chapters of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (BHA) and The Wildlife Society (TWS) at the University of Montana. This mentorship program matches experienced hunters with younger members of the club who want to gain practical hunting experience. Some of these mentees attend merely to tag along and watch a more experienced hunter, and others actually go through their firearm safety and buy tags to harvest their first wild game.

For two weekends in November, students carpool together to a cabin in the hills of Philipsburg, Montana. I was barely two steps in the door of the crowded cabin before the owner and host, Ken Goerz, thrust a paper plate in my hand and insisted I help myself to the buffet of wild-meat based foods laid out before me.

Ken and his son James have hosted this event at their cabin for several years. James became involved with BHA and TWS during his time as a wildlife biology undergraduate student at the university, continuing into his graduate research. Ken and James' hospitality is very much intended to give first-time hunters access to land and resources they might otherwise not know how to find for themselves. Even if they don't end up being life long hunters, most students have the opportunity to learn something about themselves and about hunting through the experience.

"I really think people should explore that about themselves," James told me. "Whether or not this is for them, how they feel about it, how would they describe the values they have for wildlife, how would they define ethics, ethics of hunting. What does that mean to them? That's a journey that they're going to have to go on by themselves. Nobody's going to tell you how you value things. You're going to have to come to that conclusion yourself. And it's hard to do that if you don't get out there in the field."

What's most important to James is that students who are curious have the opportunity to experience it for themselves, especially to inform their future careers.

"I respect people more when they say, 'I don't hunt, but I did once. I harvested a deer and I didn't really like the feeling that it gave me. It made me more sad than happy,'" James said. "I can respect that perspective a lot more than somebody who doesn't have any experience outdoors and is kind of judging from afar. That's really a lot of what this program's about is exposure. It can go any which way that individual wants it to go, but the exposure is important in its own right."

A few local wildlife experts were present during the weekend to provide talks on a few hunter education topics, but the weekend was mostly a time to socialize and learn the feel of a deer camp. Chapter leadership randomly assigns mentor partnerships; since I had signed up as a mentee, I found myself assigned to none other than my writing composition student from the previous year, Christian. Most of the students present already knew each other from classes, and everyone chattered long into the night until it was time to roll out our sleeping gear and call it a night. We arose in the blackness of 4 a.m., and Ken and James prepared a massive breakfast with scrambled eggs, pancakes, and plenty of coffee.

We pushed into the shock of cold air and walked uphill, crunching over frosted grasses that glittered beneath the beams of our headlamps. Christian was also paired with one other mentee, Logan, who tracked our position through an app called OnX, a local company that provided GPS map data free for student members of BHA and TWS. The land we were hunting was part of Montana's block management program. This land is privately owned, but available for hunters to use. The landowners use hunter check-in boxes to keep track of how many people use the land, and receive government money in proportion to how heavily their land is used. The system works well for both landowners and hunters, especially because it aids in building positive relationships between hunters and landowners.

This was a new kind of hunting for me; I'd never leaned back against a hillside like this. There was never this much sheer distance to contend with in my Wisconsin woods and thickets. This was a different landscape entirely. Christian had powerful binoculars to scan the opposite slope, but I spent the morning watching the crescent moon fade into the pink dawn, and then staring at a black, shadowy shape that eventually resolved into a particularly shaggy conifer. I could have sworn it moved once, but dawn can play tricks on the eyes.

When the sun had fully risen, we moved along the ridge, keeping an eye out for movement. Christian and Logan had tags for a bull elk or a whitetail doe, but there wasn't much moving on the ridge—that is, until we nearly stumbled into a group of female bighorn sheep, curled up in the grass, out of the wind. We had to swerve to avoid them; they didn't seem the least bit concerned about our approach.

Way off above a draw to our right, Christian spotted two tiny forms that turned out to be a couple of does. Christian and I cooled our heels on the hillside beneath a Rocky Mountain juniper while Logan pressed down into the draw, hoping to come up on the other side to get a shot at one of the does. Just a few minutes after he departed, the does suddenly took off running like a shot over the top of the next ridge and were gone from sight. But Logan didn't return; from his perspective, he probably didn't see the does flee. Christian went after him to bring him back to our side of the ridge; meanwhile, I sat under the juniper alone and listened to a nearby Townsend's solitaire pipe melodic notes from the top of a tree. This would be a truly incredible place to explore hunting for the first time, upon such a vast, dramatic landscape, filled with such a rich variety of game.

With the sun high, it was almost too hot for all the layers we'd donned in the morning freeze. I carried my jacket as we trudged back over the barbed wire fences to the cabin for lunch.

Over the course of the afternoon, James and Ken were kept busy running from site to site, helping pick up deer from the morning's successful hunters. One of these hunters was Nicole Ballard, a junior and wildlife biology major, who killed her first mule deer buck that weekend.

Nicole was the recipient of the Rebecca Romero scholarship, offered to students in memory of a TWS member who was struck and killed by a drunk driver in 2018. The fund helps non-resident students pay the out-of-state license fee, which can be prohibitive, especially for college students paying tuition. Nicole is a resident of South Dakota, where she spent a lot of time outdoors growing up, but never quite managed to explore her curiosity about hunting.

"When I first looked into hunting, it seemed hard and difficult and scary," she said. "Something that's hard to do yourself. You just have to have the motivation to do it. Hunting isn't such a big, daunting task anymore."

With a little bit of hunting experience under their belts, James hopes that university students like Nicole, who are headed for wildlife management and natural resource careers, will have a better understanding of the communities of people who use wild lands.

"They're going to have jobs where they're going to be interacting with not only the resources themselves, but with other users of the resource," James said. "And one of those users is hunters and fishermen and women. So it's important for them, even if they aren't going to engage in this activity long-term, they need to have some exposure to it, and be around some positive examples of people doing it, and understand why people do it, why they value resources in a consumptive way, how they feel about the land and the animals, and just some of the discussions that happen around a hunting camp. They need to be around that atmosphere at least once so that they can speak in an educated way about these groups of people."

The hunting mentorship weekend ended with several impressive mule deer bucks and a couple does, and a lot of beaming smiles as new hunters returned to the cabin to the congratulations of their weekend crew of comrades.

There are an increasing number of workshops and mentorship opportunities available to new hunters, but few are quite as accessible to new hunters as the one hosted by Ken and James. Classes such as Becoming an Outdoors Woman take new hunters on 3-day education field workshops on a variety of topics. There are also mentorship

programs through state agencies, but whatever the option, it can still be difficult for new hunters to find a support network that sticks. James and Ken make sure they do what they can to remove the cost and confusion for first-time hunters, and to connect them with people who may become lifetime hunting partners.

"Helping people get into it is a constant reminder to me of how much I like this," James said. "I see it on people's faces every year. Maybe they don't run an event, but maybe they try to take out a friend of theirs to hunt once a year. Maybe they take out a different friend every year who hadn't hunted before, or seek somebody out who hadn't hunted before. If everybody kind of became a little closet mentor, in that way, this activity is going to really take off and we can recover some of the declines we've seen in hunting over the last couple decades."

Besides the individual challenges of becoming a hunter, there are a number of factors that will affect the future of hunting that are beyond anyone's control. One of the biggest threats to hunting culture at the moment is the pervasive spread of chronic wasting disease.

The first thing I knew about CWD was that we weren't allowed to put corn in our feeder at the cabin anymore. Dad had rigged up a homemade wooden trough and placed it at the edge of the clearing, next to the path that led down to the creek. It was a natural pathway for the critters of the woods. For a while we put a game camera on it and watched five entire raccoons clamber in like it was a McDonald's playpen ball pit under

the cover of night. Blue jays and squirrels popped in and out of the feeder during the day: once I heard a jay perform an impeccable red-tailed hawk screech to flush away the smaller birds from the bounty of corn. In mornings and evenings, a pair of young bucks with tall, velvet-wrapped spikes on their heads visited the feeder.

This was exactly the type of communal feeding site that could increase the risk of transmission of CWD between animals. Recognizing the unprecedented spread of the disease, the Wisconsin DNR enacted a wildlife feeding ban that lasted for several years. Once the CWD regulation was passed, we let the corn feeder empty out and didn't refill it. Eventually it ended up tipped on its side in the yard, rotting in the damp lowland climate. At some point we must have burned it in the fire ring with the other scrap wood.

CWD is a contagious neurological condition that affects animals of the cervid family, including white-tailed deer, elk, and moose. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, in areas of Wisconsin, Wyoming, and Colorado, more than 40 percent of free-ranging cervids are affected by the disease. CWD is similar to Creutzfeldt-Jakob syndrome, known informally as "mad cow disease." It eats away at neurological tissue, reducing the animal's cognitive function, sometimes over the course of months or years. Abnormal prions (a type of protein) build up inside brain tissues, creating toxicity that destroys the brain cells. Infected animals slowly become listless and emaciated, lacking the brain function to perform their usual behaviors. Some people have even referred to CWD as the "zombie deer" disease.

The prions involved in spreading CWD can even be spread after they are shed from the animal in the form of urine, feces, and saliva. Since deer in particular spend a lot of time browsing at the edges of cornfields, it begs the question of whether crops could

become contaminated this way, increasing the risk of eventually spreading the disease to humans. Only incineration can fully destroy the prions in an infected animal.

Some areas are disproportionately affected by CWD. About 13 percent of the deer in the area of Libby, Montana are thought to be infected. Wildlife managers have suggested increasing the availability of deer tags for that region in order to help stop the spread, but that brings up another tough question: how do hunters feel about eating potentially infected meat?

As of 2020, there are no reported cases of CWD transferring to a human from game meat, but few hunters would be thrilled at the prospect of consuming tainted meat, especially when it also feeds their families. Some call this the CWD "ick factor," contributing in some cases to wasted meat. It's a tough decision for any hunter, and put communities in heavily infected areas in a bit of bind. In March 2020, the *Flathead Beacon* in Northern Montana reported that some hunters have begun to shift their hunting areas in order to avoid areas where CWD is prevalent. This shifting has an economic impact on certain areas that rely on seasonal hunting commerce.

Despite the high concern about the spread of disease, some wildlife management actions seem inexplicably counterintuitive. The National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming is one of several federally managed areas that continues to provide alfalfa and hay to wild animals at winter feedgrounds. The mass assembly of animals makes the spreading of disease, including CWD and brucellosis, a more likely occurrence. A crash in wild game numbers is the defense used by wildlife management agencies for continuing this practice year after year.

"If you don't hunt, you don't think about it," Todd Wilkinson wrote for the *Mountain Journal* in April 2020. Writing from the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wilkinson drew parallels to the many ways the spread of disease was being ignored among animal populations at the same time human populations were taking drastic measures. To ignore the spread of CWD would be foolish, especially since "several prominent epidemiologists believe CWD becoming transmissible to humans is inevitable."

Dr. Michael Osterholm at the University of Minnesota is one of the scientists who see CWD becoming a direct health problem for humans in the near future.

Humans have likely been consuming CWD-infected meat for years without knowing it. As the disease spreads further among game animals, and more people come into contact with infected meat, the chances increase that the disease will jump across the species barrier, from deer to humans, Osterholm explained. It's difficult to know how humans might be affected by eating the meat, because a disease of this type may take years to incubate before symptoms become obvious.

"Prions continue to change," Osterholm told *MinnPost*. "As they're passed from animal to animal, we're seeing selection of prions that are what we call more zoonotic, meaning they have a higher potential to transmit to another animal species—or humans—than say, the prions that were documented five or more years ago."

Even as hunters avoid areas where CWD is prevalent, their necessity for controlling deer populations becomes even more urgent. "I also worry because the last thing we want to do is reduce hunting," Osterholm said. "Hunting right now is a very

critical population management tool. If you don't reduce the deer populations, the spread of the disease would even be more dynamic."

At the current moment, the U.S. Center for Disease Control has stated that risk of transmission to humans is unlikely, but hunters in areas affected by CWD should have their game tested if possible. Animals that test CWD-positive should not be consumed.

On the topic of disease, it may be worth noting that the writing of this project occurred mainly during what has become an interesting time in history: the COVID-19 pandemic. Online communication became the primary means of interaction between many groups of people, and I noticed certain threads of thought pertaining to hunting in the time of coronavirus.

Most hunters were concerned about how the spread of the virus might affect this season's hunting plans: for the most part, spring 2020 hunting seasons went on as planned. For the most part, hunters stay in small groups and spread out over large distances, which means they don't have a high risk of transmitting the disease to each other. Travel, on the other hand, may raise the odds. Hunters who travel to isolated communities may bring the virus along with them. No doubt some hunters have canceled travel plans, which will likely have impacts on the hunting destinations that depend on business from these visitors.

In March 2020, the U.S. saw its second-highest spike in gun sales in history, following only the 2013 wake of the Sandy Hook school shooting. Fear of unrest during an unusual time prompted many of them to ensure this extra protection for themselves, and during the early part of the pandemic, when supermarket items were going out of stock, some of them had subsistence in mind. In a few hunting groups I belong to on

social media, I saw hunters boast about already being prepared with the meat from last season's hunt.

The pandemic destabilized the nation and the world in many ways, which prompted some people to evaluate survival behaviors, for the worst-case scenario. Twitter user Tim Kennedy posited that "Women right now are looking over at their partner wondering if that dude can hunt, make a fire, or fight." (To my amusement, fellow Twitter user Dr. Lauren M. Robinson rebutted, "Bro, no. I'm looking at the men around me and wondering if they washed their hands.") Another post I encountered read, "This is where you find out if you've got a hunter or a gatherer, ladies!" One Twitter conversation even postulated whether this type of life-altering crisis would cause a regression of gender roles, both during and after the end of the crisis. I found myself paying attention to the ways the pandemic discourse interacted with thoughts about community, solitude, and survival—all things that take on a bit of extra meaning for hunters. And yet, the all-consuming attention devoted to COVID-19 has further repressed conversation about an issue that has affected hunters, and for that matter, the entire global ecosystem, for far longer.

I've always seen hunting as complementary to a scientific understanding of the world. There is, after all, a great deal of biology and ecology involved: an understanding of the anatomy of a complex organism, a knowledge of the preferred habitat conditions of an animal, of their habits, their diet, their reproductive behaviors. So it has always been a

source of great frustration to me that a lack of concern and outright rejection of climate science is so frequently present among groups of hunters.

Many hunters accept and do their part to vote and speak out against policies that contribute to climate change, but for a fair number of hunters I know, climate is nearly a taboo topic. In my opinion, it seems to have more to do with politics and party loyalty than anything else, which has occasionally made for tense and frustrating conversation at hunting camps.

"The affiliation of environmentalism and left-wing political ideology in the United States has caused sportsmen and women to feel distanced from the goals of the larger environmental movement, however, and many contemporary hunters and fishers view environmentalists as misguided, lacking a true understanding of the environment they are trying to protect," wrote the author of a 2020 article in the journal *Frontiers in Communication*. Though certain groups of hunters may refuse to acknowledge climate change, hunters have historically been powerful voices for conservation causes. Waterfowl, for example, have benefitted hugely from conservation programs mainly funded by hunters in the interest of preserving their preferred game species.

In late 2019, a landmark study found that migratory bird species across the nation had declined by 3 billion birds since the 1970s. Habitat loss and climate change are some of the biggest factors in this severe population decline, but some bird populations actually strengthened during that interval thanks to conservation funding and strategic management by hunters. While game birds such as ducks and geese benefit from such programs, so do other, non-game species that depend on wetland habitat.

Seeing the successes of these targeted conservation efforts fills me with intense curiosity to know what it would look like if sportsmen and women threw their full weight behind the cause of climate change.

I understand that it may be difficult for some hunters to notice the immediate effects. Deer populations are doing just fine: in fact, deer are so adaptable that they are likely to continue to thrive even as climate change drives more sensitive species further north and further toward extinction. Climate change doesn't drool or show rib bones through a pelt of matted fur, as disease does. But it may, in fact, be partially to blame for the rapid spread of some diseases. Warmer winters mean that certain parasites—moose ticks, for example—reproduce rapidly. These ticks can accumulate on moose in such numbers that they literally suck the moose to death, especially for small and young animals. Unlike animals accustomed to warmer climates, which have grooming practices to reduce ticks, moose live in habitat that has been historically too cold for ticks to thrive. With warming temperatures, the moose have no defense mechanism against these tiny bloodsuckers.

In addition to their devastating effects on moose, humans are also coming into increased contact with ticks, which can transmit Lyme and other serious tickborne illnesses. Lyme can be a lifelong illness with a wide range of debilitating symptoms.

Animals will feel the effects in smaller ways as well. Increased carbon dioxide in the air is known to cause a lower nutritional value in the plants consumed by herbivores, making it more difficult for animals to digest, and forcing them to find greater and greater quantities of food to receive the same levels of nourishment.

Climate change is also slowly changing the migration patterns of wildlife. As winters become warmer, migratory waterfowl, for example, may elect to stay through the winter at their summer residence, or to migrate not quite as far south as in past decades. Indigenous communities that rely on subsistence hunting in the far north are seeing some of the most rapid effects of climate change on their hunting patterns. In many places, the melting of sea ice has cut off access to seal hunting sites, and game migration patterns have fluctuated unpredictably in response to warming seasons.

For hunters of the lower 48, the signs are a little more subtle. Since rifle season falls in the middle of November, hunting is usually a cool weather affair. When the days are unseasonably warm, hunters may not have the snowy conditions they prefer to track their game. They may also have to worry about finding their quarry before it spoils in the heat and sunlight. Some hunters in Montana have noted they have to climb higher and higher to gain access to elk range each fall.

Climate change will continue to intensify these effects, whether hunters choose to acknowledge them or not. The planet as a whole will adjust to climate change, but it will greatly alter ecosystems as we know them. Adaptable species such as white-tailed deer, coyotes, and turkeys will likely continue to thrive in warming conditions, but high-altitude animals such as elk may continue to decline. Hunters may be among the first to notice the differences, and with luck, the incoming generation of hunters may be even more dedicated to taking action and doing something about it.

It may very well be the "autumn of hunting," as Steven Rinella put it. It is not easy to enter the world of hunters at the juncture in time, and new hunters will face unprecedented challenges.

I have had the great luck to grow up alongside many strong, smart, noble hunters, and learn from their experiences. I have watched hunters like my brother, and my cousin Sarah, get started by their families, but ultimately decide it wasn't a practice they wanted to continue in their adult life. I have also had the opportunity to be a teacher to the hunters of the future, who taught me more about my own thoughts and feelings toward hunting than I could have imagined.

It is unclear whether hunting will ever reach the popularity it once enjoyed decades ago, or whether natural resource managers will find alternative sources of funding to care for our outdoor spaces and keep them accessible to everyone.

What is clear is that there is a new cohort of hunters coming into the woods, and I am pleased to find myself among their ranks. I have been uncertain whether there was room for someone like me in the hunting community, whether it was possible to be all the other things I am and a hunter, too. Over the course of this research, I have learned that this is not only possible: I am not alone in it.

My feelings about hunting will likely shift often in the coming years, as they do for many people. But at this moment, I expect that this November will find me high in the trees, shivering in the gray dawn forest, waiting to see whether or not a white-tailed deer chooses to lift its careful hooves across my path. If this is the autumn of hunting, then let me walk this dwindling deer path beneath the spread of birches in their lemon yellows and the cherry of the maples.

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